



*Carnal Passions Presents*

# Until It's Over

By

Lauren Gallagher



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## *Other Books By Lauren Gallagher*

Between Brothers  
The Next Move

# ***Dedication***

To Sheralan, Vanessa,  
and the other three horsewomen:  
Libbie, Loki, & Scarlett.

# One

On my way into the Pike Street Pub, I let out a groan that drowned in the noise of sports and fans. I'd let my friend Susan talk me into coming even though I really didn't feel like it, but it wasn't until I stepped through the door that the knot of *Why the hell am I here?* made itself known.

A pub I could handle. Crowds, noise, people, alcohol. All of that was fine. In fact, this was my kind of place. Baseball games on old, grainy televisions above a bar that had seen better days. At least two dozen decent beers on tap and bartenders who would sooner hit themselves over the head with a bottle of Cuervo than serve a drink with a paper umbrella in it. All it needed was sawdust on the floor and it would've been perfect.

In the years before Seattle's anti-smoking laws, the air probably would have been opaque and gray, but now it was perfectly crisp and clear. Just clear enough, in fact, for me to see exactly why I wished I hadn't come at all: Susan had spotted me and immediately sprung to life, grabbing a tall blond guy's arm and dragging him toward me. The way she gestured and rolled her eyes told me she was persuading him to follow her. The way *he* gestured and rolled *his* eyes suggested he wasn't particularly enthused about it.

*That must be Troy.* Troy Wilson, the guy Susan said I simply had to meet because he was perfect for me.

I groaned again as they wove between barstools, partygoers, and chest-high tables, closing in on me. My voice disappeared into the surrounding noise, but I didn't have the

luxury of a cloud of smoke to obscure my face, so I forced something in the vicinity of a smile.

"Hey Dani!" Susan squealed. She dragged Troy closer and gestured proudly. "This is Troy. Troy, Dani."

"Hi." Offering a smile that was a bit more genuine than my own, he extended his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." I shook his hand, and when his smile broadened, I relaxed a bit. Maybe Susan was right and this was what I needed. He deserved a chance, and maybe I could enjoy an evening out.

Troy cleared his throat and suddenly looked a little shy. "Can I, um, can I buy you a drink?"

I released a breath and with it, more of my apprehension. Though he obviously hadn't been thrilled about being pulled away from his other conversation, there was no evidence of irritation in his expression now. He seemed like a nice guy, and hopefully Susan wouldn't steer me wrong.

"Sure," I said.

"What'll you have?"

I glanced at the bar. "Mac and Jack's if they have it."

"Good taste in beer." He gave a nod of approval. "I like you already."

"I'll just leave you two alone." Susan grinned at us. In a loud whisper, she added, "Go easy on him."

My face burned. "Susan!"

Troy laughed. "Get out of here, Suze." When she was gone, he nodded toward the bar and I followed him. After he'd ordered, he said, "Sounds like you're getting a taste for some of the local beers."

"Blame Susan. She brought me out a few times when we met. Made me try something other than my usual."

"Which was?"

"Budweiser."

He wrinkled his nose. "Then thank God she showed you the light." The bartender set our pint glasses in front of Troy, who then passed one to me. Troy sipped his. "So, how do you know Susan?"

"We work together," I said.

Something in his expression changed. Dulled. "Oh." He didn't even try to feign interest.

I loved my job as a dressage trainer, but it seemed to be a coma-inducer for a lot of men these days, so I quickly changed the subject. "What do you do?"

That brought him back to life. "I manage commercial properties." He squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest. "Mostly here in Seattle, but I'm working on getting into the East Side. So it's—" He did a double take, glancing at something over my shoulder. "Oh, damn, that was fast. Looks like the game's back on." His smile was just patronizing enough to set my teeth on edge. "It was nice meeting you though, Dani."

And with that, he patted my shoulder and walked back to the other side of the room, where a few of the guys were focused on a Yankees-Cubs game. I watched, slack-jawed. *This is the man who was supposed to be 'perfect' for me?* I rolled my eyes and cursed under my breath before lifting my glass to my lips again. *Oh well. At least I got a free beer out of it.*

Though it didn't do much for my ego, it was probably just as well. I was only a few short months out of a relationship that should have ended years ago, so a boyfriend was out of the question. That, and one night stands weren't my thing. Even if they were, and if Troy was as self-centered and inconsiderate as he'd shown himself to be, that was probably a good indicator of how he was in bed. I didn't care how highly Susan thought of him, he obviously thought even more highly of himself, and I'd just spent four years of my life with a man like that.

I leaned against the bar and sipped my beer for a few minutes, then decided there was no sense wallowing in a glass of self-pity. I could do that at home, and whether I wanted to be or not, I was here.

So, I went about joining the rest of Susan's group of friends. With time and a little alcohol, I slowly got into the groove of mingling and socializing, striking up conversations with the few people I'd met before and even some of the ones I hadn't. My second beer eased the tension in my gut enough that I finally relaxed into the party atmosphere and forgot about Troy being a jackass.

Before long, several people and I were engaged in a lively discussion about the Mariners, who were having a



decent season for once. Beer bottles rose and fell with the wild gestures of inebriated sports fans and I narrowly missed getting an ice cold Miller Lite down the front of my shirt.

"Sorry, sorry," the guy said, flashing perfect white teeth and giving me a quick, conspicuous once-over. I didn't mind. I gave him the same look, allowing myself a moment to indulge in a few fantasies about what he was packing in those tight jeans.

We exchanged a couple flirtatious looks, then resumed the beer-swinging baseball discussion. Though I wasn't particularly loyal to the Mariners, given that this wasn't my hometown, I knew and loved the sport. There were worse ways to spend an evening, I decided, than drinking beer over stats and scores. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all. At least I was out of the house.

Cheering on the opposite side of the room drew everyone's attention. Our heads turned as one to see what the commotion was about.

And that's when I saw him.

He was a few feet away, far enough that had the anti-smoking laws not been passed, he probably would have disappeared in the thick gray cloud. Without the exhaled tobacco, though, I had an unobstructed view, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

His attention had followed everyone else's to the loud celebration at the other end of the bar. When the noise died down, he returned his focus to a conversation with the group in which he stood. Though everyone else spoke loudly and gestured wildly with hands and drinks, he wasn't nearly as animated and didn't say much. He seemed out of place here for some reason. I couldn't quite put my finger on it at first, but soon realized it was *because* he was quiet. Subdued. Reserved. Everything about him was subtle, but intense. When the others laughed uproariously, only the faintest hint of a grin curled his lips, his amusement subtle but unmistakable. When he listened, lines of concentration appeared between his eyebrows as if he hung on every word. And when he spoke, even though he said little, every head in the group turned.

He wasn't a wallflower by any means. Though he listened more than he spoke, he was as engaged in the

conversation as anyone else. He was interested, but seemed content to merely observe and only occasionally offer a comment.

As soon as I saw him, he fascinated me, and I wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe he just stood out because he was understated and calm in a sea of drunk and disorderly.

It was that magnetic quietude that caught my eye, but once I'd grown accustomed to his strangely intense presence, another fact about him made itself known: He was gorgeous.

He was probably a head taller than me and built slim and lean. Not a body builder, not skin and bones, but fit. Fit with just the right broadness of shoulders and narrowness of hips to make my mouth water. He stood with his weight resting on one foot, holding a pint glass in one hand while the other thumb hooked in the pocket of his jeans. Casual, but somehow dignified. Even standing perfectly still, he carried himself with a kind of masculine grace.

A tiny hint of rebellion glinted on his left earlobe, though I couldn't tell from a distance if it was a stud or a hoop. He was clean cut except for the faint shadow of stubble, which drew my attention to his pronounced cheekbones. When I caught myself wondering what it would be like to trace the angle of his jaw with my fingertip, I quickly looked away, clearing my throat and sipping my beer. I tried to concentrate on the discussion going on around me, which had moved on to last year's World Series. All I could think about, though, was that quiet presence nearby.

As soon as I was fairly sure my face wasn't glowing brighter than the neon Budweiser sign in the window, I chanced another look.

He raised his beer to take a drink, pausing with his glass nearly to his lips.

His eyes shifted.

And met mine.

Maybe it was just the dim, warm light of the pub, but never in my life had I seen such vivid blue eyes. He lowered his glass and for a moment, we held each other's gazes. Then a hint of a smile pulled at his lips and crinkled the corners of his eyes.

A second later, his attention returned to his conversation and I was left with trembling knees and a beer that suddenly wasn't nearly cold enough.

My group of strangers eventually dispersed, but the guy who'd nearly dumped his beer on me earlier lingered.

"You're Dani, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am."

"The Dani that works with Susan, right?"

"Yeah, I've worked with her for a few months. I'm—"

His eyes started to glaze. I wondered how much Susan had gabbed about our line of work if every man in the room was instantly bored when it came into a conversation.

So I changed the subject. "I don't think we've met."

"Oh, right, sorry." He extended his hand. "I'm Kyle. Susan's my sister." I shook his hand, noting with some amusement how that simple movement made his balance waver.

He leaned casually against the bar, probably trying to keep himself upright. "So can I buy you a drink?"

I tried not to groan. Just what I needed: Knocked back by Mr. Perfect, hit on by Mr. Drunk. I gestured with my glass, which was still half full. "I think I'm good for now. In fact I—"

"Well, when you finish that one." He winked.

"I, um, I think this is enough for me for tonight," I said. "Still have to, you know, get home."

"Don't worry about that." He grinned. "There's always taxis."

"I'd rather not leave my car in town. Thanks, though." I smiled, then sipped my beer to get the taste of this conversation out of my mouth. The truth was I had every intention of taking a taxi home. A taxi that didn't contain Susan's drunk, persistent brother.

"Well, if you change your mind—"

"You know, I'm probably going to take off after this one." I started to take a step back.

"But it's still early." He clapped my shoulder playfully, then held on, walking the very fine line between persistent and creepy. "Party's just getting started. You can't leave yet."

"Well, no, I—"

"So, how long have you been here? In Seattle, I mean. Not the bar. I saw you walk in." He laughed heartily, like he was certain he was the funniest man alive.

I laughed, but didn't put a lot of effort into it, concentrating more on casually freeing my shoulder from his hand. "I've been here a few months. Anyway, I need to—"

"Oh, so you're really new to town," he slurred. "You know, I could show you around the city one of these days."

"Oh, I'm..." I cleared my throat. "I'm learning it okay on my own. I'll manage."

"You sure? It can get pretty confusing."

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to keep smiling. "I'm okay. In fact—"

"Well, if you're sure." He gestured toward the beer taps. "So can I buy you a drink?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. *Dude, you are plowed, aren't you?* Taking a deep breath and surreptitiously looking for Susan or any other convenient method of escape, I said, "I'm okay, thanks."

"Aw, come on, just one beer. Really, I insist."

I started to speak, but movement beside me caught my eye. I turned, expecting to step aside for a moment to let someone get to the bar.

I wasn't expecting *him*.

Nor was I expecting him to stop and look Kyle right in the eye.

"Can I help you?" Kyle growled.

"You know the definition of insanity, don't you?" The newcomer's lips curled into that hint of a grin and when his eyes darted toward me, he winked.

Kyle narrowed his eyes. "Um, no, I—"

"It's defined as doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results." He raised his beer to his lips, casually taking a sip while his eyes once again darted to me, then back to Kyle.

Kyle sucked in a breath that was made of pure indignation. He opened his mouth to protest, hesitated, then cursed into his drink and stalked off, leaving me alone with... *him*.

I laughed and shook my head, watching Kyle disappear. "Damn, I've been trying to get rid of him since he

started talking to me. And you just..." I gestured toward the empty space Susan's brother had occupied.

"He looked pretty persistent." The quiet stranger glanced in Kyle's direction. When he turned his head, the earring—a diamond stud—caught my eye again. "You looked like you could use some help."

"Much appreciated."

He switched his drink to his left hand and extended his right. "Connor Graham."

"Dani Blake."

His palm was cool from holding his beer, but all that registered was heat. When I made eye contact with him again, his eyes were even bluer up close than they had been from across the room.

He cocked his head. "Either I've been completely oblivious, or you're new to this group."

I started to speak, then realized he hadn't yet released my hand. We both looked down and at the same moment, pulled our hands away. Avoiding each other's eyes for a second, we sought refuge in our drinks.

Then I shifted my weight. "Yeah, I'm, Susan and I work together, but I'm still fairly new to the area."

He rested his hip against the bar and his eyebrows lifted slightly. "You work together?"

Inwardly I cringed. Twice tonight I'd managed to make guys' eyes glaze over by mentioning my job. This time, I shrugged dismissively. "Yeah, nothing too exciting."

"Come on, now." He grinned and turned my knees to water. "It's got to be more interesting than pushing a desk all day long."

"I'm sure Susan's told you everything about it."

"Not really, no." Even as he took another drink, his eyes were fixed on me, the slight tilt of his head bidding me to continue.

I fidgeted a little, pretending to just casually shift my weight again. "Well, like I said, it's nothing too exciting. We train dressage horses and jumpers, give lessons to kids and adults, break young horses, things like that."

"Sounds pretty interesting to me," he said. "My sister's got a couple of horses. Hell if I know a thing about them, but I wouldn't mind learning."

Like old friends, we fell easily into conversation. No matter what we talked about—my job, people we knew, the baseball games on the screen—he hung on my every word. It was the same way he'd interacted with the others when he didn't know I was watching, so I had no illusions that this was specially for me, but it was still refreshing after Troy and Kyle. Even some commotion behind me warranted nothing more than a brief flick of his eyes before his attention returned to me. Otherwise, he stayed focused on and interested in our conversation. Focused on me. I was surprised it didn't make me uncomfortable, but then again there was no rational reason it should have. He wasn't scrutinizing, just interested.

"So anyway," I said after explaining some of the finer points of my job. "That's what I do for a living."

He smiled. "Sounds like you're doing what you love." Raising his glass, he added, "More people should."

I wondered when he'd moved closer to me. Or I'd moved closer to him. I could have sworn we were standing farther apart but, perhaps through a series of motions so minute I hadn't noticed, we'd come closer. He was close enough to touch, and touching him was oh so tempting.

When our eyes met, the hint of a grin and the sparkle of mischievousness in his eyes dared me to do it. Instead, I muffled a cough behind my hand and said, "So, what do you do?"

Setting his beer on the bar, he rested his elbow beside it. "At the moment, I'm a desk jockey, but that's just to pay bills until I graduate."

"What are you studying?"

"I'm finishing my master's in linguistics."

"Linguistics?" I couldn't help but grin. "So that would make you a cun—"

"A cunning linguist, yes." He rolled his eyes and laughed.

"Can't say I've ever met a linguist before."

He grinned. "Not even a cunning one?"

"*Especially* not a cunning one."

He lifted his beer again, his eyes narrowing and his lips curling into a smile that made my knees tremble. "What a pity."

## Two

Lost in conversation with Connor, I didn't realize just how late it was until I noticed that the pub was getting progressively quieter. People migrated toward the door, the bartenders spent more time cleaning than pouring, and the baseball games on TV were long since over.

Connor glanced at his cell phone. "Wow, it's almost one."

"Already?" I said. "Time flies, I guess."

He smiled. "So it does."

"I should probably go." *But damn, I don't want to.*

"Yeah, me too," he said. "Another hour and they'll throw us out anyway."

"Bastards."

Connor chuckled. "Probably just as well. Or we might end up here all night."

It took me a second to realize why that would be in any way undesirable. I could think of no place I'd rather be. But, the night had to end sooner or later. We couldn't stay here all night, so it was, as Connor said, just as well.

He stood and looked at the door, then at me. "Do you mind if I walk you back to your car?"

"I took a taxi." I gestured at my empty glass. "I was planning to have a few more of those than I did."

The smile on his lips was caught somewhere between devilish and shy. For a moment, he avoided my eyes. "If it's not too forward of me..." A pause, possibly gauging my reaction before he'd fully asked the question. "...could I give you a ride home?"

Had it been anyone else, I'd have balked at the offer. After all, he was a complete stranger. Did I really want to get into his car and show him where I lived? But Susan knew him, and even if she knew such impolite cretins as Troy and Kyle, I doubted she associated with psychos.

"You don't mind?"

The shyness faded. "Not in the least."

"What if I said I lived a few hours away? Like, say, Bellingham?"

His expression was all devilishness now, and my knees shook when he said, "Then I guess we'd be in for a long drive together, wouldn't we?"

I suddenly wished I lived in Bellingham.

"Let me take care of my tab and we can go," he said.

I nodded and he disappeared into the thinning crowd.

Out of nowhere, Susan was suddenly by my side giving me a good-natured glare. "Dani Blake, if I didn't know any better, I'd be sure you were just flirting with Connor."

"Define 'flirting.'" I batted my eyes.

She rolled hers. "After all the trouble I went to setting you up with Troy."

I snorted. "Please. I don't think he was interested, considering how quickly he made his escape as soon as you were out of earshot."

Susan blinked. "What? Oh, I'm going to kill him, that—"

I put a hand up and shook my head. "No, no, trust me, it's for the better."

Her eyes flicked toward the bar and she smiled. "Well, if Connor's a suitable consolation prize, don't let me get in your way."

"Consolation prize?" I glanced at Connor. "You won't hear me complaining. Besides, he's just taking me home."

"Taking you home?" Her eyes widened. "Does that—"

"As in driving me back to my apartment, Susan." I eyed her. "So I don't have to pay for a cab. Nothing like *that*."

She laughed. "And I suppose you have some oceanfront property in Arizona to sell me while you're at it?"

Though I tried to laugh it off, I could only half-heartedly deny what my intentions were. One night stands



weren't for me, but I hoped the next half hour or so would at least warrant a "can I see you again?"

Connor's voice came from behind me: "Susan, you'd better not be filling her head with lies about me."

Susan put her hands up defensively. "No lies, none at all."

"Or truth, for that matter," he said. I turned to see him giving her a look that might have been intimidating had it not been for the mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

After some playful ribbing, we said our goodbyes to Susan and headed out of the pub. It was a warm night, considering it was only early spring, but the occasional gust of cold wind off Puget Sound made me wish I'd brought a jacket. Or a shirt that served as a somewhat better defense than this thin blouse. At least I was wearing jeans. Susan would be miserable when she stepped outside in her super short skirt.

About three blocks from the pub, Connor indicated a black parallel-parked Jeep. He unlocked it and opened the passenger door to let me in before going around to the driver's side.

He slid into the driver's seat. "So do you really live in Bellingham?"

*I wish.* "No, my apartment is in the U-district."

"Not far at all then," he said quietly.

"You sound disappointed."

He shrugged and buckled his seatbelt. "I have to admit, I was hoping for a longer drive."

My heart skipped. That was probably the least subtle thing he'd said all night, and I so, so hoped he wasn't just saying it. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted from him, what I wanted out of this, but whatever it was, I hoped he wanted it too.

Connor shifted gears and pulled out onto Pike Street, following it in the direction I indicated. While he drove, he said, "You mentioned that you're not from this area. Where are you from?"

"Wyoming. Moved here about seven months ago."

"What brought you out here? Work?"

Before I could think twice, I said, "Boyfriend."

He glanced at me, eyes wide.

I laughed. "Ex-boyfriend now." The momentary panic faded from his expression, but unasked questions hid in the furrows between his eyebrows, so I continued, "He wanted a change of scenery, so he moved. About four months after we got here, he decided to change *all* the scenery."

Connor shot me an incredulous look. "Are you serious?"

I shrugged. "Eh, he was a jackass. It's better this way."

"Still," he said. "I can't imagine packing up your life, moving halfway across the country, then having someone turn around and pull a stunt like that."

"Yeah, tell me about it," I said dryly. "But, it's done. I'm here."

At that, Connor smiled, but said nothing.

"What about you?" I asked. "Are you from this area?"

He nodded. "Born and raised."

"Seems like a lot of people who are born here, stay here."

"It's a great place to live," he said. "Well, I might be biased. All I know is that no matter where I go, this city will always be home."

I could have sworn my apartment was further from the Pike Street Pub, and I cursed every green light that whisked us closer to the our destination. I wasn't ready for this night to be over. There had to be some unscheduled middle-of-the-night road construction somewhere. Or a fender bender. A damned red light. A riot. Something. Anything.

But, after mere minutes, Connor pulled his Jeep into one of the vacant guest spaces at the foot of my building. For the first time since he shooed Kyle away at the bar, an awkward silence hung between us.

"Listen, without resorting to some clichéd pick-up line," he said. "I'd like to see you again."

I smiled. "Well then, without resorting to some clichéd response, why don't I just give you my number?"

"I like the sound of that." He pulled his phone off his belt and slid it open. I recited my number and he entered it, showing me the screen to make sure it was correct.

With my number securely in his phone, we could

safely call it a night. Go our separate ways knowing we'd cross paths again and soon. Still, neither of us moved, nor did we speak.

He scratched the back of his neck, resting his other arm on the steering wheel. "I know I should let you go, but to be honest..." He paused, a shy smile pulling at his lips. "I don't want to."

I glanced around the parking lot. "Well, it's not like they're going to kick us out of here."

He laughed. "True." He set the parking brake and sent my pulse into overdrive. My heart pounded over the purr of the engine, but the tiny world inside the Jeep was otherwise silent. Though conversation had come easily all night, I couldn't think of what to say now. Everything that came to mind would either sound stupidly awkward or be rife with double entendre.

Connor took a breath and started to speak, then hesitated. He rested his elbow on the steering wheel and rubbed the side of his jaw with the backs his fingers, the muffled scratch of skin on stubble making my fingertips tingle. I wanted to touch him. Good God, I wanted to touch him.

*We just met. I barely know anything about him, How can I want him this badly? This can't—*

My mouth went dry when the tip of his tongue traced a quick arc across the inside of his lower lip. Then his body shifted and the seatbelt snapped back as he freed his arm from the shoulder strap. When he turned to me, I wanted to let his beautiful eyes mesmerize me, but all I could do was stare at his lips when he spoke.

Leaning across the console, he reached for my face and said, "I'm sorry for the way you ended up moving to Seattle." His fingertips met my skin and he drew me closer to him as a ragged breath parted my lips. "But I have to say, I'm really glad you're here."

His hand moved into my hair and he kissed me.

Just like everything about him tonight, his kiss was the very epitome of quiet intensity. Neither gentle nor rough, aggressive nor passive, but somewhere in between, with all the electricity of a first kiss and such familiarity it was as if he'd known all along just how I'd like it.

My fingers sought his face and finally satisfied the craving to feel him, to memorize the contours of his jaw and trace his five o'clock shadow. His tongue parted my lips and when his jaw moved and his cheek hollowed beneath my palm, I had the space of a single heartbeat to shiver, knowing he was deepening this already spine-melting kiss.

The tip of his tongue slid beneath mine and neither invited nor demanded, simply assumed I'd allow him to draw it into his mouth. Even the way his mouth moved was subtle, like he wanted to make sure I felt every place our lips met and tasted every touch of his tongue against mine. I was hyperaware of everything he did, of every way we made and broke contact. His breathing slowed and I couldn't help but mirror it, inhaling deeply when he did, releasing when his warm breath brushed across my skin.

My finger grazed the surface of his earring before combing through his thick hair. When my fingertips ran down the back of his neck, a shudder pushed him closer to me.

He looked at me and sucked his lower lip into his mouth as if to get one last taste of our first kiss. "I've been wanting to do that all night," he whispered.

*Do it again and I swear to God, I'll be your slave for the rest of the night.* I wasn't quite brazen enough to say it, though. Besides, speaking was out of the question at this point. My mouth knew how to do one thing and one thing only.

My fingers tightened in his hair and he offered no resistance when I pulled him into another kiss. When we separated this time, we stayed close, just looking at each other. In the back of my mind, I couldn't quite grasp the fact that we'd been strangers just hours ago. Nameless faces in a crowd.

But now we knew each other's names, and I desperately wanted to hear him say mine over and over again.

With the taste of his kiss on my tongue, speech was still nearly impossible, but the only alternative was going out of my mind, so I swallowed hard. "Do you—" I paused. This wasn't like me at all. One night stands weren't my thing, but they sure were tonight. "Do you want to—" My eyes darted toward my apartment, then back to him, and I lifted my

eyebrows.

Connor unbuckled his seatbelt.

## ***Three***

We managed to keep our hands off each other all the way across the parking lot and into the stairwell. The whole way, I didn't dare look at him. Part of me was afraid I'd suddenly remember that this wasn't something I normally did. Part of me was sure if I caught his eye, we wouldn't make it to—let alone through—my front door.

Fishing my keys out of my purse, my hands shook, but I hoped he didn't see. I couldn't tell which tremors were from nerves and which were from anticipation. What was I doing? Inviting him into my apartment after a few hours of conversation and a couple of long kisses?

The memory of his kiss tingled on my lips and my mouth watered at the thought of tasting him again. *This can't be anything but a good idea.*

I put the key in the door, somehow remembered which way to turn it to unlock the deadbolt, and let us into my apartment. As soon as we were inside, I turned the deadbolt again, then tossed both purse and keys into a heap just before Connor pushed me up against the door and kissed me.

Outside the confines of his Jeep, his kiss reached new heights of hungry and desperate. His hands tangled in my hair and his hips pressed against mine, just the proximity of his cock making my clit tingle. I had to have him. I had to have all of him. Hot, naked, touching, tasting, everywhere, every way. Right now.

"Bedroom," I murmured.

Together we stumbled through the darkness, bumping walls, furniture, and each other. In the bedroom, we only got as far as kicking off shoes before I pulled him down on top of me. I'd never been so hungry for a man, but no man had ever kissed me quite like this.

It didn't occur to me to turn on a light until Connor pushed himself up and took his shirt off. When he came back down to me and my hands found the firm, warm contours of his muscles and the unmistakable grooves of a six-pack, I needed to see him.

After I'd turned on the bedside lamp, I blinked until my eyes adjusted. And when they did, I wasn't disappointed in the least.

'Fit' didn't even begin to describe the sculpted, powerful build of his chest and shoulders. He was as lean and slender as I'd first thought when I saw him in the pub, but every bit of him was solid and defined. Some men were a disappointment when the clothes came off. Connor was not one of them, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

He didn't seem to mind my staring. In fact, he was much too busy watching his fingers trail across my skin to even notice. They followed my collarbone to the lapel of my blouse, then down to the first button. With a flick of his thumb and forefinger, the button was open. His eyes met mine and that barely-there grin made my temperature jump.

He unfastened each button in turn, but made no effort to push my shirt out of the way. I was tempted to wriggle out of it, to expose as much skin as I could for him to put his hands and mouth on, but what he was doing seemed so deliberate. Calculated. He knew what he was doing, even if I didn't, so I let him.

It was only after he'd opened every last button that he hooked a single finger under the lapel and drew it down, deepening the "V" of my blouse one inch at a time. His fingertip caught on my bra for a fleeting second, just barely brushing my breast before continuing downward. That touch, however brief, was electric, and I closed my eyes when a shudder went through me.

A flutter of warm breath above my bra was my only warning before soft lips pressed against my skin. It was a light, gentle kiss, but my back arched and pushed me closer

to him, letting his five o'clock shadow scuff against my skin and raise goose bumps all over me. Another huff of breath, this time with the force of a quiet laugh, made me shiver.

I looked down at him and met his eyes in the same moment he kissed my skin once more. Pushing himself up on his arms, he came up and kissed my mouth. When his hips touched mine, when his belt buckle chilled my skin and I realized that we were both still mostly dressed, my toes curled. He had to know how powerful his touch was, how just the lightest contact flared my every nerve ending to hyperawareness. He had to know that all he had to do was say the word and we could call foreplay complete and skip right to what we were here for.

But he didn't.

I'd never known a man to savor every gentle touch and long, deep kiss the way he did. It was some ungodly hour in the morning, we were both horny, and still he took his time. This was the kind of sex I'd fantasized about, and we hadn't even gotten our clothes off yet.

His hand went to my side and started around to my back, which obediently arched. Still kissing me, he sat up, the hand on my back urging me to follow him, and we rose together.

I whimpered into his kiss when he pushed my blouse over my shoulders, fingertips following it until it fell away completely. Once it was gone, he wrapped his arms around me and ran his hands up and down my back, my sides, my arms, exploring every inch of exposed skin the way his mouth explored my own.

When he went for the clasp of my bra, my nipples ached and tingled. I didn't know what I wanted him to touch them with first—his skilled fingers or his sensual, attentive mouth—but I knew I wanted him to touch them. Soon. Now.

He tried to unsnap the clasp, but failed. Tried again. And again.

"Damn it," he muttered.

"Need a hand?" I said.

He laughed. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all." Willing my fingers to cooperate, I reached back and unsnapped it, shrugging just enough to let the straps fall over my shoulders. He slid them the rest of the



way down my arms, then cupped my breast. The tip of his thumb made a slow circle around my nipple, turning my insides to liquid. I put my arms around him and pulled him closer, but even casually using him for support was useless when the heat of his skin melted my spine.

He must have known how precariously aroused I was, because with one hand still on my back, he guided me back down to the bed.

No longer needing to hold onto him to keep myself from collapsing, my hands were free to touch and feel him. With only the lightest touch of my fingertips, I traced every curve and contour of his muscles. He moaned against my lips when my palms drifted down his sides to his narrow waist, pausing on the cool leather of his belt. I followed his belt to its buckle, and he raised his hips enough to grant me access. I slid my hand between us, squeezing him gently through his jeans and smiling into his kiss when his breath caught.

Shifting his weight onto one arm, he reached for his belt with his free hand, but I gently pushed it away.

"I can do it," I said.

"I know you can." He kissed me lightly. "But I want your hands on me."

"My hands are on you." I squeezed him again, then traced the outline of his cock with one finger.

He closed his eyes. "You know what I mean," he said, barely whispering, his lips parting and eyebrows knitting together when I gently dragged my nails along the front of his jeans.

"I know exactly what you mean," I said. "And I'm getting there." Frustration tried to show itself in the grooves between his eyebrows and the thinness of his lips, but quickly disappeared when I drew his zipper down and unbuckled his belt. The buckle, no longer quite so cold now that it had been between our bodies for so long, still gave me goose bumps when it touched my skin because I was now that much closer to touching more of *his* skin.

And I was desperate to touch him. Between the two of us, we got his jeans and boxers over his hips and out of the way, and when my fingers closed around his cock, my entire body reacted as if he'd just thrust deep inside me. A wave of cool heat rushed through me like a phantom orgasm. Or a

prelude to the real thing. We both gasped, trying to draw the same air from the space between our lips, and I couldn't quite tell whose tremors were whose as I stroked him.

Forget more foreplay. I was still half-dressed, he hadn't even touched me below the waist yet, but if I didn't have him inside me in the next few seconds, I was going to need medical attention.

"I want you—" I hesitated. I'd never been the one to make that move, to make that call. Self-consciousness lodged the words in my throat.

"You want me to what?" A playful lilt nearly masked the unsteadiness in his voice.

"I—" I took a breath, unable to look away from him, but unable to say what it was I wanted when he looked at me so intently.

He must have known, because he bent and kissed my collarbone, freeing me from the scrutiny of his eyes only to distract me with delicious contact. His lips went from my collarbone to my neck and electricity went from my pussy to every nerve in my body.

"You want...?" A simple prompt to coax me to speak, to try to tease the words out of me, but the vibration of his voice against my throat silenced me.

I finally whispered, "*You*."

The shudder that ran down his spine pushed his body closer to mine and his cock pressed against my hip. He raised his head and kissed me passionately.

Without a word, he reached over the edge of the bed for his jeans while I kicked my own off.

Rifling around in one of his pockets, he muttered something under his breath. Then he froze. "Oh, son of a..."

"What's wrong?"

He cursed, then looked at me over his shoulder. "I don't suppose you have any condoms handy?"

My heart sank. "No, I don't."

"Damn it," he whispered. "Neither do I." He cursed again, then rejoined me on the bed. "I guess we'll just have to save that for another night."

I tried not to groan or roll my eyes at the situation. No condoms, no sex. We could still fool around, but I couldn't have him inside me. Frustration tightened in my gut. *Guess*

*he's getting his and I get to wait until 'another night.'* I loved pleasing a man, but if I didn't relieve some of this tension, I was going to lose my mind.

"Fortunately," he whispered against my lips as his hand moved down my side to my hip. "There are plenty of other things we can do tonight." His hand drifted across my hip and parted my thighs but continued its downward trek, trailing his fingers almost to my knee before starting back up. Closing my eyes, I sucked in a breath through chattering teeth when a single fingertip just barely touched my pussy.

He pushed himself up on one arm and flicked his tongue across my nipple. "I can't do everything I want to do, but I'll be damned if I'm going to leave here without making you come a few times."

My breath caught, as much from his words as the way his fingers gently circled my clit. I wasn't used to a man who was so willing—eager, even—to get me off when he knew he wasn't going to fuck me that night. My orgasms were always a means to an end, a step toward my lover getting what he ultimately wanted. If he wasn't going to get that, then why bother?

Disbelief melted away as reality took the form of Connor's palm resting against my clit while his teeth gently held my nipple so his tongue could tease it. Two fingers slipped inside me, and a low growl emerged from the back of his throat.

"Jesus, Dani," he whispered, withdrawing his fingers and slowly sliding them back in, all the while pressing his palm against my clit. With a mix of arousal and frustration, he said, "I can't even tell you how much I want to be inside you."

I bit my lip and moaned, my hips moving in time with his hand's slow, easy motion.

"Oh my God, Connor," I breathed, his name rolling off my tongue as naturally as if we'd been lovers for years. "That's..." I whimpered as his fingertips gently stroked my G-spot. "That's incredible."

"You're right, it is." His voice wavered slightly, his eyes filled with something like wonderment. "I love the way you—" A sharp breath cut him off. "I love the way you move with my hand."

"I can't help it."

"I know, and I love it," he said. "When my hand moves faster, your hips move faster." He sped up just slightly, and my body responded immediately. "And when I slow down, so do you." He did. I did.

"God, yes," he whispered against my neck. "I can't wait to feel you move that way when I fuck you." Kissing just below my jaw, he added, "I want you so badly, Dani." He exhaled hard, a tremor rippling through him, right down to the fingertips that played against my G-spot. "I want to be inside you, I want to feel you, and I want to be completely at your mercy."

All I could do was moan.

His rhythm was more deliberate now, no longer marveling at the way we moved together but seeking that perfect speed, that perfect pressure, to grant me release.

Just when I was about to come, when madness was *just* beyond my reach, his hand stopped.

"Don't stop," I moaned, completely unashamed of the desperation in my voice.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm just getting started." He brought his hand up and let two moist fingertips touch my lips. I took a breath, the scent of myself making me dizzy. Without thinking, I wetted my lips, the tip of my tongue brushing his finger. The brief taste overwhelmed me and I wanted more, more of myself on *him*, and I sucked his fingers into my mouth, letting the sweet of my pussy and the salt of his skin consume me.

He gently took his hand back, but before I could even think to protest, he kissed me. A throaty growl hummed against my lips as his tongue met mine. The taste of his mouth combined with my own pussy was beyond overwhelming, and the more I tasted of both, the hungrier I became.

When he broke the kiss, Connor was breathless.

"My God, I love the way you taste," he said, exhaling just before he kissed me one more time. His lips traveled down my jaw, my neck, my chest. "I love the way you taste... *everywhere*..." He drew my nipple between his lips and sucked gently, sweeping his tongue across it a couple times for good measure, just in case I had any sanity left.

He continued kissing his way down the center of my chest and my belly, then to my side, inching closer to my hip. His stubbled jaw brushed my side and the feather light touch of his lips sent electricity up my spine.

He parted my legs with the touch of a fingertip, then kissed his way down my inner thigh as he settled onto his forearms. A whimper of anticipation escaped my throat as he held my hips in both hands and his lips again touched my inner thigh. Kiss by kiss, his mouth neared my pussy. When he was just a single kiss away from my clit, he murmured something I couldn't hear, something that resonated across nerves that could only register the sweet oblivion he promised with every touch.

"I should warn you," he said, this time loud enough for me to hear. "I can do this all night." Before my lust-occupied mind could translate the words, Connor's lips closed around my clit.

His mouth was beyond incredible. He explored, tasted, flicked here, circled there. Every motion was subtle and precise, making sure I was fully aware of every way he touched me and that I truly felt every tremor and shiver he created.

One hand released my hip and he once again slipped two fingers inside me. Crooking them slightly, he found my G-spot, his fingertips matching the slow, smooth motion of his tongue. He effortlessly brought me right back to the delicious crossroads between desire and delirium, and there he held me, teasing me with this denial of the one thing I would have begged for had speech still been possible.

And still, he kept me there until, with just the right flutter of his tongue and stroke of his fingers, he granted me release. White-hot electricity shot up my spine and crackled across my perspiration-glazed skin as everything in and around me *exploded*.

The room spun and I heard my own voice, was sure my lips at least attempted to form words, but couldn't be sure just what, if anything, I said. And I didn't care. Even as I came down, as I drew a breath of cool air that slowed the spinning sensation, my world revolved solely around the point of contact between his mouth and my pussy.

He backed off just enough to let me return to Earth and keep me from getting hypersensitive, his tongue maintaining the softest, gentlest motion around—but no longer touching—my clit. His fingers remained a constant, still presence against my G-spot, easing off just enough to let me breathe.

But he didn't stop.

Though he held back now, everything he did promised more. This wasn't a winding-down, a gradual loss of momentum before the inevitable halt. It wasn't a conclusion, but an intermission.

"Connor," I said. "Connor, I want..."

"Hmm?" he murmured against my clit, the vibration liquefying my thoughts. Then he kissed my inner thigh, giving me a chance to breathe and collect what was left of my rational mind.

"I want..." I wetted my lips. "To do something for you."

Against my skin, his lips curled into a smile. His fingers moved almost imperceptibly inside me, and he looked up. "Trust me, Dani. You are."

"You know what I mean. You're doing..." I gasped when his warm breath whispered across my pussy. "...everything for me, I want to..."

The movement of his fingers changed, reversing direction and circling just a little faster, pressing just a little harder.

"I can wait," he said. "There's no need to hurry." He closed his lips around my clit and his fingers continued gaining speed. The bed sheets bunched in my hands and my back lifted off the bed. The intermission was over.

His mouth stopped, but his fingers kept me on the path to another orgasm, maintaining his momentum as he looked up at me again.

"There's plenty of time for you to do whatever you want to me, but I love the way you taste when you come..." Just before he went back down to my clit and sent me out of my mind, his voice dipped to a breathy growl. "...and I *have* to taste it again."

## ***Four***

Buckling Jester's halter was a simple task, one I'd performed thousands of times, but it was a bit complicated today. My eyes refused to focus and my fingers didn't want to cooperate. My mind was a thick cloud of fatigue that even a quad-shot espresso couldn't quite penetrate.

I yawned and led him out of his stall into the aisle. I clipped the cross-ties to his halter and went about brushing him, my exhausted muscles protesting every movement as my eyes threatened again and again to close. Though I'd never in my life been so tired, I wasn't about to complain. I'd managed a precious hour or two of sleep before I had to be at work, but not nearly enough to render me functional and coherent.

Normally, I started my day with some of the more challenging horses. Orion, the warmblood no one had bothered to train for his first five years. Xena, the jumper who was a stubborn mix of dumb as a post and too smart for her own good. Dante, the train wreck of an ex-racehorse with about three years' worth of horrible training that needed to be undone. It was better to deal with them early in the day, then move on to the easier horses.

Those three most likely had today off. I didn't dare approach any of them when I was in such a foggy state of mind, and if my second espresso didn't break through, then there was no point in bothering today. A day off wouldn't kill them.

So I started with Jester, one of my own horses. A late morning trail ride on a mellow creature like him was just

---

what the doctor ordered and at least stood a chance of waking me up. Worse came to worse, if I was too tired to navigate, Jester knew the way home.

When I cross-tied him in the aisle, he nudged my hip, nibbling at the pocket of my jeans.

"No treats yet, silly boy," I said, gathering his long forelock and tucking it under his halter so it would stay out of his eyes. He again tried to investigate my pocket and I gently pushed him away. "You have to work before you get a treat, you know that." The look he gave me could only be described as pouty. I laughed and scratched his ears before grabbing a brush to clean him up.

While I groomed and saddled him, my mind wandered, and for all my inability to think coherently, one thing kept itself firmly planted at the forefront of my mind: Last night.

With my number in his phone, the taste of his kiss on my lips, and the promise of a rematch to finish what we'd started, Connor had left with the rising sun. He'd left me smiling, aching... and wondering.

I wanted more. I wanted to feel him inside me. I wanted him to fulfill all the promises and fantasies he'd whispered in my ear in that strained, nearly-there voice.

But then what?

Though casual sex had never been my thing, after last night, I could certainly see myself sleeping with Connor with nothing except physical pleasure in mind. The fact I'd never had a strictly sexual fling before seemed like a ridiculous reason to forego a chance at doing just that with him. With all the orgasms he'd given me and all the things he could do with his mouth and hands, if all he wanted was something sexual, I was more than willing to oblige.

But what if he wanted more?

I was only a few months out of a long relationship. A long, miserable relationship. I'd given Matt entirely too much of myself, up to and including leaving my hometown to follow him to the Pacific Northwest, and I was still picking up the pieces from that. I wasn't ready to give anyone anything I couldn't take back on a moment's notice.

Susan's voice shook me back into the present. "So, how did it go?"

I looked up, pretending she hadn't startled the hell out



of me. She had a bridle on her shoulder and her arms folded across her chest, a knowing grin on her face.

"How did what go?" I asked.

"You know, with Connor?" Her eyebrows lifted. "Last night?"

I chewed the inside of my cheek to suppress a smirk, trying to focus on buckling Jester's girth. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Woman, please. I saw the way he was looking at you." She shifted her weight and the bridle on her shoulder jingled.

"So?" I said. "It was just a look."

"Uh-huh, and I know that look," she said. "Don't even try it, Dani. I know that man way better than you do."

I grinned. "Oh, do you now?"

"I knew it!" She laughed, almost squealing. "So, how was he?"

"Well, if you already know—"

"I don't know him in the Biblical sense," she said. "I just know him well enough to know when he's set his sights on someone, and girl, from the way he was looking at you, I'm surprised he didn't eat you alive."

I snorted with laughter.

"What, do—oh for God's sake." She shook her head and clicked her tongue. "That's not what I meant." Then she grinned. "I'm guessing you had a good time, though?"

"You could say that." I stepped into the tack room and grabbed Jester's bridle. "In fact, I think I might want to do it again."

"Good woman." Her smile fell a little. "I guess it's a good thing he was there, then, after Troy was such a dick to you."

I shrugged. "I just wasn't Troy's type, I guess. But I'd say Connor and I got along quite well." I unbuckled Jester's halter and slipped it over his neck so I could put his bridle on.

"Well, I'm glad you found someone there," she said. "I really felt bad when I found out he'd treated you that way."

"No hard feelings." I nudged the bit against Jester's lip. He resisted for a second, ducking his head to try to get away from me. I pushed my thumb into the corner of his

mouth and pressed against his gums. Finally, he gave up and yawned, which I swore was his passive aggressive way of saying "fine, I'll put the stupid bridle on." *Little boys and their attitudes*, I thought, slipping the bit into his mouth.

Speaking of little boys and their attitudes, I looked at Susan and said, "By the way, I hope Kyle wasn't too put off."

"That idiot was hammered last night." Susan shook her head. "I'm surprised he wasn't hitting on every woman in the room."

"Gee, I'm touched."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." She paused. "Are you heading out on the trails or working in the arena?"

"Trails." I fastened the curb chain and adjusted the throatlatch. "Want to go?"

She pursed her lips and her eyes darted toward the door at one end of the barn. "You know, I think I will. Gavin's home and he's being a jackass today."

I groaned at the mention of our volatile, obnoxious boss's name. "He's always being a jackass," I muttered. "If he wasn't, I'd be worried."

"Yeah, but when he's being a jackass to or around me, I think I'd prefer to go someplace else." She slid the bridle off her arm. "Give me a minute to throw a saddle on Bridger."

Within ten minutes, Bridger and Jester were saddled and aimed toward the trails. As the farm faded in the distance behind us, I was glad I'd brought Susan along. The gentle swaying of Jester's slow, plodding walk might have lulled me to sleep. With someone to talk to, though, I stayed awake as the trail meandered under the horses' hooves. Our saddles creaked softly in the near-silent woods, underscoring our conversation. Our conversation which, before long, wandered back to Connor.

"So, you're going to see him again?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" I said. "After everything he did to me last night, I—"

"I don't even want to know," she said, feigning disgust.

"Liar, you asked."

"Okay, I did. But I don't need to know all the gory details."

"Jealous?"

Her cheeks colored a little and she grinned. "Maybe."

"I just can't believe you were introducing me to Troy and not Connor," I said. "Why in hell were you withholding that gorgeous piece of information?"

Her fingers idly played with a lock of Bridger's mane and the sudden seriousness in her expression unnerved me. "To be honest, I didn't even think of it, because I didn't think he was 'looking' at the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't been single much longer than you have," she said. "In fact, up until about three months ago, he was engaged."

My stomach flipped. "Is that right?"

She nodded. "Five years together, almost a year with a ring on her hand, then she up and leaves him."

"Wow," I said. "How did he take it?"

"Hard to tell." Susan shrugged. "He didn't say much about it either way. But, he loved that woman. Whether he shows it or not, I'm sure it hurt, and it probably still does."

"Great," I said. "Just what I need. A guy who's as fucked up in the head as I am right now."

"He's not necessarily fucked up in the head," she said. "But he may not be over it yet. I have no idea. He's a difficult man to read unless he *wants* to be read."

"How so?"

"I mean I've seen him put on a happy face when I knew he was dying inside," she said. "There was one time when he and his fiancée almost split up. Don't know exactly what happened, but we all thought they were done. Another friend of ours talked to him, and he was falling apart over it. I mean, absolutely crushed. Thought for sure it was over." She paused for a moment, letting the silence hang over the creaking saddles and thudding hooves. "But the same night they had that conversation? He was out at the pub with the rest of us and you'd never know anything was wrong."

I took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Well, maybe that's a good thing. If he isn't ready for anything, and neither am I, then..." I shrugged.

"Maybe so." She paused. "Did he mention that he's leaving the area soon?"

A mixture of disappointment and relief fluttered in my stomach. "He is?"

She nodded. "He's going to Northern California to get his doctorate."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond. He hadn't owed me that information, so I didn't hold it against him that he hadn't told me. Besides, we hadn't discussed his future or mine. Up until he left this morning, the future had ceased to exist, and when it resumed existing, it was only in the context of "next time." He hadn't owed it to me to tell me, but knowing it now certainly stacked the deck a little differently for the future. If he was leaving, then anything that developed between us could only be temporary. I wasn't picking up my life and following another man. Once was more than enough for that. So when Connor left, he would be gone.

And while that disappointed me, because I could definitely get used to the things he did to my body, it also made this... safer. There was nothing at stake. We weren't playing for keeps. It could just be a fun fling. A last hurrah for him before he left Seattle, a rebound for me so I could move on from Matt.

I couldn't help but smile to myself. Maybe this would work itself out better than I expected.

## ***Five***

I collapsed another box and threw it on top of the growing stack of similarly flattened cardboard beside the door.

In the short time I'd lived in this one bedroom apartment in Seattle's University District, I had barely managed to unpack. Boxes were stacked in every room, most of them still full but open after I'd gone rifling through them to find this or that essential item. Unpacking meant settling in, and I hadn't been so sure I wanted to settle into this new life. Every belonging that found a permanent home in a cabinet or on a shelf in this apartment was a nod to Matt's decision to end things.

Tonight, though, unpacking was something to occupy restless hands. I was still too exhausted to do anything that required much brainpower, and this was a relatively simple task. In a few days, I'd probably be furious with myself for how I'd organized the books on the shelf in the living room or the picture frames standing along the window sill, but it was something to do.

I desperately wanted sleep, but forced myself to stay awake until my normal bedtime. One day of screwed up sleep was enough. Unpacking required minimal thought and just enough physical activity to keep me awake.

By the same token, it required just enough physical activity to tax muscles that still ached from last night. When I bent to pull a stack of dishes from the bottom of a box, my hip smarted. Reaching over my head to hang a picture on the wall, my shoulders protested. A twinge at the base of my

neck was undoubtedly from going down on Connor. I'd never known a man who appreciated a long, drawn out blowjob quite like he did. Nor had my jaw ever had to strain quite so much to accommodate a cock. Every ache and pain was well worth it for the things we'd done.

*God, I want him.*

I let my mind revisit everything that had happened last night as I wandered from room to room and unpacked. After a while, I made it into the bedroom, and the mere sight of my rumpled sheets made my breath catch.

*I want him. I want him now. I want to finish what we started.*

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I cut open another box and started pulling out knickknacks, makeup, a couple of candles, some—

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me." I pulled out four unopened condoms and glared at them. I looked at my bed, then at the box beside me, and groaned. All night long, when I would have sold my soul to have Connor's cock inside me, the condoms we'd needed were but a few feet away.

Cursing and grumbling, I threw them in the nightstand drawer along with the pack I'd bought on my way home from work. I doubted I'd need that many for whatever this was with Connor, but I certainly wouldn't complain if we got to use every last one.

I smiled to myself and closed the drawer, grabbing my phone off the nightstand and heading back into the living room. Normally I wouldn't get my hopes up about a man's sexual prowess until I'd actually had sex with him, but I'd already done everything else with him. I knew he had stamina to spare. I knew his kiss was enough to make me forget my own name. I knew he had a cock that gave my jaw a run for its money.

There were no two ways about it: sex with Connor Graham would be incredible.

While I continued unpacking, I kept my phone within arm's reach, glancing it at it now and again as if I could will it to ring. Then again, Connor probably knew all the stupid rules of the dating game. All the nonsense about waiting a few days to call to keep from looking desperate.

I didn't care if either of us looked desperate. I was

desperate. After having a taste of everything Connor had to offer, I wanted him and I wanted him badly. It was nearly nine at night and I had to work tomorrow, but I wouldn't have turned him down if he'd called to say he wanted to come over immediately and fuck me. My breath caught. Just the thought triggered a ripple of electricity from my clit, and I nearly dropped a stack of books.

*Call me, Connor. Please. Please. Please.*

Murphy's Law and a tired, absent mind conspired against me, and when my phone did ring, it was on the other side of the room. I sprinted across the floor, stumbled over some boxes, tripped, caught myself on the armrest of the sofa, then dove for the coffee table. I landed beside it in an undignified heap, but at least I had my phone.

*Oh, no, I'm not desperate. Not me.*

I took a deep breath, calming the incriminating breathlessness in my voice, and answered.

"Hello?"

"Dani?" *That voice. Oh God, that voice.*

"Connor?"

A soft laugh. No, a release of breath. Was that relief? He cleared his throat. "I, um, did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, no." I picked myself up and dropped onto the couch. "Not at all."

"Good, okay." The line fell silent, and I wondered if he was scrambling for something to say as much as I was.

"Did you think I gave you a fake number or something?" I laughed nervously.

He chuckled. "Well, it crossed my mind, but I hoped I made a better impression than that." *Oh, you did, Mr. Graham. You did.*

Another awkward silence fell. Last night, we'd shamelessly begged each other for the kinds of things we'd never speak of within earshot of our mothers, but now the simple art of conversation was lost on us.

"Do, um," he paused. "Do you want to—" His hesitation made me smile to myself. Last night he'd been so unshakably confident and now he sounded adorably nervous. That, and we'd left ourselves in an odd situation, with something unfinished. I was secretly thankful he was the one doing the asking; I wasn't sure just how we should go about

this. Just agree to pick up where we left off and fuck? Attempt something like a date to keep some illusion of respectability?

He cleared his throat again, then said, "Are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

*God I hope so.* "Um, well, no, not at the moment."

He hesitated again. "Could I take you to dinner?"

"Sure, yeah." I silently cursed my inability to string together a more coherent sentence, but since it was Connor on the other end of the line, this was the best I could do.

"Well, I," he said, sounding about as articulate as me. "I was thinking, there's a, um, there's a steak place down on the waterfront that's pretty good and isn't usually crowded during the week."

*Or we could skip dinner.* "That sounds fine."

"Why don't I—" He paused. Muffled a cough. "I could meet you there."

*Good idea. If we meet here, we won't be darkening the doorway of any restaurant any time soon.* "I still don't know the city very well, but I'll manage."

"Are you sure?" he said. "It's fairly easy, but traffic can be a bitch—I mean, there's sometimes a lot of traffic that time of night."

I laughed into my hand, trying to hide the sound. It struck me as ironic that he was suddenly so shy, to the point of being careful with his language, when he knew full well just how filthy my own mouth could get. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, well, if you get lost, call me," he said. "There's a parking lot next to the corner of Broad Street and Alaskan Way. Right beside the water. It's usually not too bad and it's free. Just follow Broad until it turns into Alaskan, then turn right into the lot. I'll wait for you there."

"What time?"

"Seven?"

"I'll be there."



## ***Six***

With the early evening traffic and my own lack of familiarity with Seattle, it took me a bit longer than I expected to find the parking lot where I was to meet Connor. The fact that I was more than a little distracted didn't help.

I didn't want to call if I could help it. The bizarre layout of narrow streets was difficult enough to navigate without talking on a cell phone, which was illegal anyway, but having Connor's voice on the other end added a whole different dimension of distraction. Though it was getting dangerously close to seven o'clock, at least I was on Broad Street now, so Alaskan Way probably wasn't much farther up. The glittering waters of Puget Sound were visible up ahead, so I was close to the waterfront.

*If it gets to be ten after, I'll call.*

At exactly eight minutes after seven, the sign for Alaskan Way came into view. Broad Street curved to the left, becoming Alaskan, and on the right was the parking lot Connor had indicated. I pulled in and searched for an empty space, forcing myself to concentrate on stripes and asphalt instead of looking around for him.

When I'd parked, I walked back toward the entrance to the lot. Not far from my own car, I found his Jeep. Though he wasn't in it, the very sight of the vehicle put my senses on high alert.

I walked faster, searching, scanning. I swore my skin tingled as the cool evening air teased my nerve endings with the knowledge of his presence.

*He's nearby. Somewhere in this lot. He's here.*

There he was.

He stood beside the railing, looking out at Puget Sound. His back was to me, but a glance to his left revealed his profile, confirming that it was, indeed, Connor. Not that I needed confirmation. Even before I saw his face, before I was close enough to pick out any features that would differentiate him from the rest of the population, I knew. My senses zeroed in on him with a tingle of certainty that *this* was the man I was going to have sex with before the night was over.

Something in the distance held his attention, so I had plenty of time to enjoy the sight of him before he noticed me. The wind whipped at his hair and batted at the sleeves and collar of his dark brown leather jacket. His jeans were just snug enough that they only acknowledged the wind with a hint of movement. I wasn't usually the type to pay much attention to a man's rear, but those jeans on that butt made my fingers curl, wishing they were in his back pockets.

I was a few steps away when he turned, and the smile that lit up his face nearly made me trip over my own feet. The warm light of the waning day picked out coppery highlights in his windblown hair and added a degree of richness to his already intense blue eyes.

*Jesus Christ, you're beautiful.*

He put a hand on my waist and kissed me lightly. Before he pulled away, he hesitated, starting back for more before quickly backing off. I didn't know if he was concerned since we were out in public or if he just didn't know how forward to be, but I didn't push him.

"Long time, no see," he said with a shy smile.

"Much too long," I said. We both laughed, then dropped our gazes.

He glanced down the road, then back at me. "The, um, the restaurant's a bit more packed than I expected. It'll probably be an hour or more."

"I don't mind waiting." I shrugged.

He smiled. "Their lobby's crowded. You okay with waiting out here?"

"This is fine with me."

So there we stayed, standing beside the railing in the parking lot. The question was there, unanswered in the

silence that punctuated our conversations about everything but what we really wanted. I wasn't quite sure why we both held back. Maybe it wasn't something two almost-strangers could comfortably just come out and say. Connor was a man of few words, and I gathered he wasn't the type to dance around a subject, but he was far too eloquent to say something like, "We have condoms now. Why don't we just pick up where we left off?"

And so we danced. Jobs. Families. Friends. The past, the present, and with the exception of the rest of tonight, the future. He didn't mention that he was moving in a few months and I didn't ask; it wasn't my business and I wasn't looking any farther ahead than tomorrow morning. For now, we were just shooting the breeze until one of us worked up the nerve to go there.

"So when do you graduate?" I asked.

"June. *Finally.*"

"And you said you're studying linguistics, right?"

He nodded.

"What made you go into that field?"

"I'm fascinated with language. It's a powerful thing." There was a hint of self-consciousness in the half-shrug and the downward flick of his eyes. "It was poetry that first got my attention, believe it or not."

I blinked. "Is that right?"

Another nod. "I can't write the stuff to save my life, but I love it." Sliding his hands into his pockets, he looked at me. "Do you like poetry?"

"I'll be honest," I said. "I've never quite understood the attraction to a lot of it."

He cocked his head and rested his hip against the railing. "Really?"

"There's some beautiful poetry out there, don't get me wrong, but for the most part..." I shrugged, running a hand through my hair as the wind tried to blow it into my face. "Some of it just seems so, I don't know, overblown. Flowery metaphors when something far simpler would do."

He smiled. "Understandable." Pushing himself upright, he moved closer to me, one hand drifting over the small of my back.

*Ahh, contact. Finally.*

"I prefer simplicity myself," he said. "But sometimes there's beauty and power in the way something's written." His hand went from my back to my side and he moved behind me, his body just barely touching mine. "Something can mean the same thing, but come across completely different depending upon how it's said."

"Fair enough," I said. "I guess I've just always preferred the more direct approach."

He laughed, his free hand reclaiming a tendril of my hair from the wind and tucking it behind my ear. "Consider the situation you and I are in now." His breath cooled the side of my neck and he lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "On one hand, I could quote Marvell and say *'If we had world enough, and time, this coyness lady were no crime'*."

Something in his voice, or maybe it was the warmth of his body when his arms slid around my waist, made my breath catch. I turned around in his arms and swallowed hard. "And on the other hand?"

He kissed my neck and pulled me a little closer. "On the other hand..." When he raised his head, a hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his lip, but even in the fading light, the hunger in his eyes was unmistakable. "...I could just say, *'life's short, let's fuck'*."

## ***Seven***

Falling together into Connor's bed, we dragged each other down even while we pushed clothes out of the way. We were well beyond any desire to carefully remove each piece. Clothes weren't gift wrap, not tonight, and the only purpose they served was to keep my skin from his.

Shoes thumped to the floor. Connor struggled with my bra clasp again, but there was no time to waste, so I took care of it for him. While I did that, he unbuckled his belt with unsteady hands, but as soon as I dropped my bra off the side of the bed, he pushed me onto my back and sucked my nipple into his mouth. Resting his weight one arm, he used his free hand to get his zipper undone and push his jeans over his hips.

We separated to get the rest of our clothes off. After he tossed his jeans aside, he leaned over to the nightstand. He grabbed a couple of condoms out of the drawer and set them beside the lamp, keeping them within easy reach. The sight of the square packets made my hands shake. Nothing standing in the way now. Nothing keeping us from what we'd wanted so badly the other night.

Our eyes met and we both froze, staring at each other as lust held us in suspended animation, as if we were both unsure if we dared to release this energy.

In the next instant, I was in his arms, and we tumbled down together, and when he breathed, it was my breath he drew, and whatever thought we might have had of containing this hunger was a distant memory. His hands were everywhere—touching, grasping, feeling, seeking—

---

while he kissed my neck, my shoulder, my lips. His breath came in short, shallow gasps that rushed across my skin. Up until now, he'd been the very picture of calm and controlled, but in my arms, he unraveled.

"I usually take my time," he said, panting against my lips in between kisses. "I usually—" Another kiss and a shiver when I ran my nails up his back. "But I want—"

"Please," I whimpered.

Uncertainty flickered across his expression, but as quickly as it was there, it was gone. Whatever question had been in his eyes, he found the answer in mine, because he lunged for the nightstand.

When he came back, he looked at me and said, "I want you on top." He tore the wrapper with his teeth.

We changed position and my mouth watered as he rolled on the condom. I'd never been with a man with a cock as thick as Connor's, and I was simultaneously unsure if I could accommodate him and damned sure that I wanted to.

I straddled him and he rested his hand on my waist. The other held his cock while I eased myself onto him. The second he touched my pussy, I had to bite my lip to keep from moaning.

"Oh God," he whispered, watching me take him slowly, while I let no more than the head of his cock inside me. "Oh God, you're so..." He groaned and closed his eyes, the hand on my waist tightening just a little. His hips lifted to meet mine, trying to push himself deeper, but I rose just enough to stay out of his reach. A frustrated sound escaped his lips and his eyes shut even tighter.

"Please, Dani..." His voice was just this side of a choked sob. "Please...please..."

My body ached for him, but still I only let the head of his cock into my pussy, granting him only the shallowest strokes. He wanted more—I wanted more—but I kept him waiting. This feeling of control, of being something other than a passive participant, was addictive. It was as foreign as it was exhilarating. He wanted me, he wanted to be deep inside me, and had he been on top, he'd already be there. Instead, he'd surrendered and let me deny him.

*I want to be completely at your mercy*, his words from the other night echoed in my mind as he begged, "Dani, oh

God, Dani, please..."

I rose off him almost completely and there I paused. His hands twitched on my hips, his entire body seeming to anticipate the down stroke that didn't follow. Frustration and confusion twisted his lips and he held his breath, screwing his eyes shut.

I didn't move, not until he exhaled with a whispered plea:

"Dani, I—"

In one swift motion, I took him all the way inside me and we both gasped. His eyes flew open and his lips parted to release a breath, but the air stayed in his lungs. He gripped my hips, holding me against him as if he was afraid I'd never let him this deep again.

I wasn't going anywhere, though. I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. For an eternity of seconds, my entire world revolved around the intoxicating confusion of pain that should have hurt, of the vague discomfort of my pussy accommodating a cock that was just the right amount of too much.

"You okay?" His voice, gentle even when he spoke through chattering teeth, brought me into the present. "Talk to me, Dani."

A single nod was all I could ask of my overwhelmed body. His hips moved beneath me, pressing against me, either trying to push himself deeper or encourage me to move. I rose off him slowly, gasping at the gentle friction as he moved inside me.

"Oh my God," I heard myself whimper.

"You feel fucking amazing like this." His voice was barely a whisper and almost a moan. His hands moved up to my breasts and he cupped them gently, teasing my nipples with his thumbs and forefingers. "You *look* fucking amazing like this."

I looked down at him, watching his face while I rode him slowly. Every time I came down, when his cock was deep inside me, his lips parted and he lost his breath. When I rose off him and paused, he gasped for breath, only to lose it again when I came back down.

"I knew you'd feel incredible, but this..." His eyebrows pulled together and his back arched beneath us. "Dani,

you're..." Another breath. Then he looked at me and wetted his lips. His hand went to the back of my neck and he pulled me down to him, kissing me deeply, almost violently.

Still kissing him, I rested my weight on my arms and took control. I found just the right angle with my hips, rolling them forward and back so his body hit my clit each time his cock hit my G-spot. Following my lead, he fell smoothly into my slow rhythm, raising and lowering his hips in time with mine. Every stroke drove me wild, white-hot waves radiating from my pussy like cold water through my veins and fire beneath my skin.

A shudder ran up my spine and I moaned into his kiss. I nearly broke my rhythm, but his body kept mine in the same slow, perfect cadence. Then I shuddered again and sat up, throwing my head back and whimpering.

He put his hand on my hip and let his thumb gently rub my clit. Or rather, he let my clit rub against the still presence of his thumb, leaving it to me to put just the right amount of pressure just where I needed it.

"Oh God, Connor, oh...God..." My orgasm threw me off balance and I fell forward again. He took advantage, grabbing my hips and thrusting up, fucking me as hard as he could, keeping me coming until my vision blurred and my spine wanted to collapse.

When I could finally see straight, when the room stopped spinning, the air still buzzed with the breathless tension of a breaking point reached, and a second later, he groaned.

"Oh... fuck..." His fingers twitched against my hips. "Oh fuck, I'm so... close..." He closed his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath.

I pushed myself up on shaking arms and forced him to fall back into my slow, easy rhythm. Nearly stopping, but not. He furrowed his brow, but with a barely audible sigh, gave in.

"Jesus, Dani, I want to come," he whispered. "You've got me so fucking turned on, I..."

"I know." I rose slowly, came down just as slowly, watching his lips twitch with frustration. There was nothing more arousing, I discovered just then, than a man like Connor losing—*surrendering*—control.



When I resumed my earlier motion, rolling my hips forward and back, his eyes flew open and he gasped.

"Oh my God, oh my God, whatever you're—" His breath caught and his back arched. "Whatever it— whatever it is you're doing, don't...stop..."

I didn't stop, but I slowed down, reining back my rhythm just enough to make him groan with frustration. Just when he went to speak, undoubtedly trying to voice his desperation, I picked up speed again, and the only thing that escaped his lips was the sexy, spine-tingling moan of a man about to come undone.

A second later, he grabbed my hips and pulled me down onto him. His body jerked, his eyes shut tight, and his lips parted in a silent cry.

For a moment, he was still, not breathing, not moving, not loosening his grip on my hips. Then, piece by piece, he let go. His hands released me. He eased back onto the bed. A long, ragged breath slipped past his lips.

When he opened his eyes, he blinked rapidly before looking at me and grinning.

"You're fucking incredible." He pulled me down to kiss him. "I've been looking forward to this all damned day."

"You're not the only one." I kissed him lightly. "In fact, I'm already looking forward to it again."

He trailed a finger up the center of my back. "I promise I won't keep you waiting long."

"See that you don't." I laughed when his eyebrows jumped.

I pushed myself up and moved off him so he could take care of the condom, then we settled back onto the bed on our sides.

"That," he said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "was well worth the wait."

"I'm not complaining about the other night either," I said.

"Nor am I." He smiled and kissed me gently. "Maybe it was a good thing we didn't have any condoms handy."

"Maybe so."

His fingertips trailed down the side of my face. "Not just because of the anticipation, either. That night was incredible too."

"You're telling me?" I smiled. "I don't think I've ever come that many times in a night."

He chuckled. "I'd love to claim that I do that with every woman, but that's the first time I've ever made a woman come so many times."

"Well, you're more than welcome to do it again."

His hand moved into my hair and he kissed me again. "Maybe I will. I rather enjoyed it."

"Don't let me stop you." My fingertip ran across his sweaty skin, absently drawing light circles across his chest. He sucked a breath in through his teeth.

"Like that?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"Hmm, good to know." I raised my head to kiss him and my hand went to his shoulder. Then I gently pushed him back onto the bed, lying on my side next to him as he'd just been beside me. "And since you like this..." I trailed my fingers over his chest again, "...it's a safe bet you'll also like *this*." I'd barely inclined my head when he sucked in a breath, and when my tongue flicked across his nipple, he released that breath all at once.

"Be careful," he said.

I circled his nipple with the tip of my tongue. "Why's that?"

"Because I—" He inhaled sharply when I did it again.

"Because if you keep doing that, I'll get turned on again."

"And?"

"And then I'll have to put you on your back and fuck you."

"Well then," I said. "I should keep doing it, shouldn't I?"

## ***Eight***

Blinking back fatigue from another long, long night with Connor, I cued Jekyll into a working trot. He moved into the trot without protesting, and for that I was thankful. The immense Hanoverian could switch moods from docile and placid to pissy and unpredictable in a matter of seconds. To say the least, he'd more than earned his nickname, and I hoped he kept his "Mr. Hyde" side to himself today.

So far so good.

We made a circle around one half of the arena. Then I gave him a gentle nudge, asking for a canter on the left lead. The transition into the canter was smooth, but he led with his right leg instead of his left. This was one of his bad habits, and any kind of impatience on my part would trigger one of his moody episodes. As calmly as possible, I brought him back down to a trot, cued him again, and on the next stride, he went into a beautiful canter on the left lead.

Now if I could just get Sara—who would be riding him at an upcoming show—to correct him so calmly, they might stand a chance of getting through their dressage tests without Mr. Hyde putting in an appearance.

When I was finished with my ride, I let the reins hang loose so he could stretch his neck. Patting his shoulder, I let him plod lazily around the arena to cool off.

"Hey, Dani," Gavin's voice boomed through the arena and echoed up into the rafters.

"Speaking of Jekyll and Hyde," I muttered to myself. I steered the horse with my legs, guiding him to the gate upon which my boss leaned. "What's up?"

"The farrier will be here on Thursday." He held up a clipboard. "Do you need Jester and Calypso on the schedule?"

"Please," I said. "Just the usual. Trim and shoes."

He nodded and wrote on the clipboard. Then he looked at Jekyll. "How's he doing today?"

"Still having some trouble with that left lead," I said with a shrug. "But he's getting better." I half-expected him to huff and curse about the horse's ongoing problems, but he simply nodded. His neutral, calm mood unnerved me. He was sometimes harder to deal with like this. At least when he was yelling and stomping around, I knew what to expect. When he was like this, the volatility still lurked beneath the surface. The skies were clear, but some of the worst storms were the kind that came out of nowhere.

"What about Dante?" he asked.

I swallowed. "He's, well, he's got a ways to go."

Gavin eyed me, and the dark clouds gathered. "That's not what I want to hear," he said through his teeth. "He's going to Wenatchee in a few weeks."

*And he's nowhere near ready.* "I'm doing the best I can with him," I said. "There's just a lot of crap I need to undo. His last owner worked him over."

My boss took and released a sharp, impatient breath, then shook his head. "Well, as long as he's ready by then." With that, he walked away, and I could finally release my own breath. Dante wouldn't be ready for the show. Even if he was, just getting him into the trailer would be an ordeal and a half.

But I wasn't going to argue with Gavin today. I was exhausted and he was in a halfway decent mood. It was best to tread lightly on these eggshells until I was ready to take whatever backlash came when I dared tell him the neurotic thoroughbred had no business going to a show anytime soon.

Not today, though.

Gavin didn't know shit about horses. He was a businessman who'd married Leslie, an accomplished horsewoman, and suddenly fancied himself a horseman. He talked a good game, but he didn't know a hoof pick from a stirrup leather. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell him as much

because he also signed my paychecks.

I took Jekyll back in the barn, unsaddled him, and put him away. While I tried to decide who to work next, Susan came in, leading Xena.

"How was she?" I asked.

Susan groaned and rolled her eyes, but patted the mare's neck anyway. "She has a stupid today."

I laughed. "Better you than me, then."

"Gee thanks." She cross-tied Xena and unbuckled the girth. "Are you trail-riding today?"

"I was thinking about it," I said. "Calypso could use a day out and so could I."

"Well, I'm taking Bridger out as soon as I'm done with this one," she said.

"I think I'll join you, then."

Fifteen minutes later, Calypso and Bridger were saddled and ready to go.

I put my foot in the stirrup and hoisted myself up, wincing as I swung my leg over. Once I was in the saddle, I rubbed my hip gingerly.

"Sore?" Susan grinned.

"Maybe."

"And would that have anything to do with—"

"Maybe."

"You dirty girl."

My cheeks burned. "What can I say? He's a lot of fun."

Susan clicked her tongue and shook her head. "So are you going to see him again?"

"Well, maybe after I catch a few hours of sleep," I said as we steered the horses toward the trail. "That man will be the death of me if I don't."

She laughed. "I didn't think he had it in him. Who knew?"

"I certainly do."

"Ugh, I don't want to know."

We came to a fork in the trail.

"Left or right?" I asked.

She pursed her lips. "Hmm, how about left? Lazybones here could use a run up a few hills."

"Left it is." We followed the trail to the left. This was a narrower trail, but still wide enough for us to ride side by

side. It was also much more hilly than the other direction, and although we didn't like to encourage our horses to race, neither of us could resist the occasional race up one of the steeper inclines.

"So you're really going to see him again?" she asked. "Like, keep seeing him?"

I nodded. "Planning on it, yes."

"You think this is going to, you know—"

"Turn into a relationship?"

"Yeah."

Shaking my head, I said, "Nah. I don't want anything more."

"Can't blame you. I mean, I can vouch for him. He's a good guy, he really is." She paused. "Just, you know, be careful. God only knows how he's doing after that breakup."

I shrugged. "Perfect for me, then. Like I said, I don't want anything, and he's leaving in a few months anyway."

"Well, yeah, but what if you get attached? Or he does?"

"He's leaving, so it doesn't matter. He hasn't said anything about that, by the way. Are you sure he's moving?"

She nodded. "Olivia—that's his ex—told me a while back that he'd gotten into the program he wanted at Stanford. It was his top choice and, from what I hear, they offered him a pretty sweet deal. I mean, I don't know how scholarships or whatever work with doctoral programs, but Olivia said he was beside himself about it. So, no way in hell he's backing out of something like that."

Disappointment tried to tug at my gut, but I ignored it. "That pretty much settles it, then. He's leaving, so we can't do much more than what we're doing."

Susan snorted. "And I'm sure you're terribly disappointed with what you're doing with him."

I put a hand to my forehead and sighed melodramatically. "Terribly."

Calypso fidgeted when one of the hills came into view. Bridger snorted and chomped his bit.

"Think they want to race?" Susan asked.

"Hmm, I don't know. Maybe they—" I dug my heels into Calypso's sides and he shot into a gallop.

"You cheater!" Susan called out.

I laughed, standing up in the stirrups and pushing the reins forward so I didn't hold him back. Behind us, Bridger's hoof beats crescendoed as he tried to catch up. I urged Calypso on, squinting as the wind made my eyes tear up. The horses thundered up the hill, wind whipping at manes and clothes. Bridger was nipping on our heels, so I tapped Calypso's sides with my heels to encourage him to run just a little faster.

They'd nearly caught up with us when we reached the top. There, we brought them back down to a trot, then a walk. Even though the horses had done the running, Susan and I were out of breath, laughing and patting their necks as we continued down the trail.

"That wasn't fair," she said, panting.

"Just keeping you on your toes."

She pointed at me and gave me a menacing glare, though her poorly hidden smile killed the effect. "I'm going to get you back for that."

"Yeah, we'll see about—" My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. "Oh for Christ's sake." While I fished it out, Susan craned her neck.

"Gavin?" she asked.

"Probably. Since we had the audacity to take a trail ride on a nice day." I looked at my phone open and my stomach lurched.

*Matt.*

"Oh fuck," I muttered.

"Boss man?"

"My ex." I flipped my phone open. "Hey."

"Hey, Dani." His voice made bile rise in the back of my throat.

I coughed. "Um, what's up?"

"I found some of your stuff while I was going through some boxes," he said. "Not a whole lot, but would you mind coming by to get it? Like, soon?" The disgust in his voice set my teeth on edge.

"How soon?"

"Today, if you can."

I laughed. "Jesus, Matt, you think I can just drop everything and come over? Listen, I've got a lot going on these days." Susan and I exchanged mischievous looks and I

smothered another laugh. "I'll call you in a few days, but I can probably come by this weekend."

He huffed. "Fine. Just, as soon as you can, okay?"

"Of course," I muttered. After I hung up, I swore under my breath.

"What's his problem?"

"Apparently he found some of my stuff in the apartment." I shoved my phone back into my pocket. "You know, it's lovely how he always sounds so fucking thrilled whenever he calls about stuff like this. Like, how dare there be any evidence that I ever set foot in that goddamned apartment."

"Ugh, he's a bastard," Susan said with a dismissive gesture.

"You're telling me. After I get my stuff, he'll probably have an exorcist in just to make sure I'm completely gone."

We rode on, talking about the horses and Gavin instead of my ex, but the phone conversation lingered in the back of my mind. Matt's efforts to evict me from his life and remove all reminders of my existence hurt, but not as much as they used to. In fact, it occurred to me that this was the first time my ex had crossed my mind since before Connor and I met down by the waterfront last night. I couldn't help but smile to myself. Nothing removed Matt from my thoughts like a night of sweaty, desperate sex with Connor.

*And I think I could go for some more Connor-induced amnesia tonight.*



## ***Nine***

The moment Connor walked into the restaurant, I knew there was something I'd hoped he would help me forget, but I couldn't remember what it was. *Mission accomplished*, I thought when I stood to greet him with a quick kiss.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Traffic was insane."

"It's always insane in this city, isn't it?"

He laughed. "True enough, true enough."

"That's one thing I just haven't gotten used to yet," I said. "The roads are confusing enough without all the traffic."

"Yeah, I hear that." He quickly perused the menu before setting it aside. "It's one thing I'm not going to miss about this place."

I raised my eyebrows. "Miss?"

"Yeah, I'm—" His gaze shifted and his cheeks darkened a little. "I'm leaving the area in a few months."

*So it's true.* "Oh. Um, where to?"

"Northern California," he said. "I was accepted into the doctorate program at Stanford."

"Wow, congratulations."

"Thanks." He smiled. "They were my top choice. Not that I particularly want to spend five years of my life in California, but..." He shrugged. "There's a price for everything, isn't there?"

*Indeed there is.* I cleared my throat. "So, hopefully this doesn't make me sound like a complete idiot, but what exactly does one do with a degree in linguistics?"

"Well, I'm specializing in Forensic Linguistics."

"Forensic Linguistics?"

"Yep. It's pretty cool, I think," he said. "They study things like suicide notes, threat letters, that sort of thing. See if they can identify who wrote them based on how they use language. Word choices, stuff like that."

"Wouldn't it be pretty obvious who wrote a suicide note?"

"If it was actually a suicide, yes. But sometimes it's a forgery to cover up a murder."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Or, as another example, it's a way of determining if a confession is legitimate or forged. When someone has a certain speech pattern or writing pattern, then their confession or suicide note deviates from that, it can raise some red flags."

"Wouldn't most people's normal patterns change if they're confessing to a crime or writing a suicide note?" I asked. "I mean, I would think stress changes the way people think and speak."

"Sure," he said. "But there are indicators that it's someone else's speech pattern. Like, the order of certain words. Say if someone usually says 'then we', but their confession is full of 'we then'. It's subtle, but enough to raise questions."

"Wow, I've never heard of that. Sounds like an interesting job."

"I like to think so." He shrugged. "It's probably excruciatingly boring to some people. I find it fascinating."

"I can see why," I said. "I didn't realize that field even existed."

"Neither did I, until a few years ago," he said. "I was asking an advisor about majors and all of that, and said that I was interested in linguistics, but didn't know what the hell I'd ever do with it. He gave me some information about forensic linguistics, and I never looked back." Connor took a drink. "So, as long as we're talking about careers, what made you decide to train horses for a living?"

I shrugged. "I grew up around them. My family has a cattle ranch outside of Cheyenne, and horses were just part of the business. Figured I'd just keep doing the cattle thing, but a friend got me into jumping, then another got me into

dressage."

He rested his elbows in front of him and folded his hands under his chin. "Now, forgive my ignorance, but what exactly *is* dressage?"

I laughed. "If I try to explain it, we'll be here all night."

"Are you suggesting I'm unintelligent?" He put a hand to his chest in mock offense.

"Not at all," I said. "It's just that hard to explain unless you know a thing or two about horses."

"Which I definitely do *not*. Just, you know, in layman's terms."

I turned my nose up and sniffed haughtily. "Dressage people are *above* 'layman's terms', Mr. Graham."

He chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Dear God, it's one of those sports, isn't it? The snobbiest of the snobs?"

Nodding, I laughed. "Yeah, basically. But at least you called it a sport, so I'll forgive you."

"Well, it's in the Olympics, isn't it?" he said. "I do believe being a sport is a requirement for that."

"You'd be amazed at how many people don't think it's a sport, since they think the horse does all the work."

"I've wondered about that, to be honest with you." He grinned. "So I assume you're going to tell me that's not the case?"

"Most definitely not," I said. "I use everything when I ride. Legs, abs, butt—"

"Explains a lot." He winked and picked up his drink.

I laughed. "Yeah, so, the horse definitely doesn't do all the work."

"Okay, so it's definitely a sport, then," he said. "But, what is it, exactly?"

I pursed my lips, then took a breath. "Well, the name originates from a French word meaning 'training'. It's kind of like figure skating or gymnastics or ballet; the horse and rider learn patterns and movements that become sequentially harder as you move up the levels."

"And the purpose of the patterns and movements?"

"To demonstrate that horse and rider are working together, basically," I said. "Like dance partners. As if they're

thinking with one mind instead of one responding to the other's cues."

"I suppose that's a bit more complicated with an animal than another human?"

I laughed. "I don't know. Sometimes I think it's easier to get on the same page with a horse than most humans."

He chuckled. "For some reason, I don't doubt that at all. So how many levels are there?"

"You start with Training Level," I said. "which is relatively simple, then there's First through Fourth. After that, you move into the upper levels like Prix St. George, Intermediaire, and Grand Prix. Grand Prix is where you start seeing Olympic-level competitors."

"So where are you, as far as a level?"

"Depends on the horse," I said. "I'm working with a few at Training Level, a few at some of the mid-levels. I've competed as high as Prix St. George, and I've got one now that's getting ready to move into that level."

"Sounds like it might be fun to watch."

"I'd suggest coming to a show if I didn't think it would bore you to tears," I said.

"Actually, it sounds kind of interesting. If you don't mind my showing up, I might just take you up on that."

"Your funeral," I said. "Two weeks from now, I'll be up on Whidbey Island for a few days. I know it's a bit of a drive, plus the ferry ride, but—"

"I'd love to."

"Don't blame me if you're bored," I laughed. "I can usually drag a guy to one show, but after that, he'd sooner chew off his own arm."

He grinned. "Well, assuming you'll be dressed the way the dressage riders dress at the Olympics..."

"You've watched it?"

"I've caught it a few times, tried to figure out just what the hell it was," he said. "But I certainly noticed those outfits."

"Filthy man," I said.

Another grin. "Isn't that why you're out with me?"

"Damn right." Then I paused. "Speaking of which..."

His eyebrows jumped. "Hmm?"

"Okay, so, if you're leaving in a few months, that

means this..." Gesturing back and forth at the two of us, I trailed off, not quite sure how to put it into words.

"Could get a little complicated."

I nodded. "I guess it's probably something temporary. I mean, you're moving, I'm still fresh out of another relationship."

"As am I." He paused. "In all honesty, I'm perfectly okay with doing this and knowing it's just a short term thing. What about you?"

"I don't have a problem with it," I said. "I mean, as long as we're on the same page. Same expectations."

"Which boils down to going out, having fun, and having a lot of sex, right?"

I laughed. "Exactly."

He smiled. "Well, I'm okay with that arrangement if you are."

"I'm definitely not complaining about it." I leaned forward and rested my forearms on the table. "So, I guess if it's just a short term thing, then maybe we should use the time we have and get in as much as possible."

He grinned. "You know, I love the way you think." Then he looked past me and gestured to get someone's attention. "Check, please."

## ***Ten***

Connor's apartment was closer than mine, so we went there. When he got out of the Jeep, though, he cursed under his breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked, closing the Jeep door with my hip as I pulled my purse onto my shoulder.

"Roommate's home." He nodded toward another parking space. "I thought he was out tonight."

"Should we go to my place, then?"

"You think I can wait that long?" He smiled and put his arms around me. "We'll just have to be quiet." His kiss was gentle, but more than enough to make my pulse race.

"I think you're seriously overestimating my ability to stay quiet in bed with you."

"You'll just have to try."

His stubble brushed my chin, and I shivered. "Maybe you'll have to keep my mouth occupied then."

He laughed softly. "Oh, I will." He kissed me, teasing my tongue with the tip of his. Then he broke the kiss and whispered, "Come on, let's go."

Upstairs, after he'd let us into his apartment, the tinny sounds of televised voices came from down the hall. When we stepped into the living room, two guys sitting on the couch looked up from watching a movie.

One lifted his arm off the other's shoulders and stood. "Oh, hey, Connor. Didn't realize you were going to be home tonight." He extended his hand to me. "You must be Dani."

"I am." I shook his hand.

"This is Evan, my roommate," Connor said. He gestured past Evan and added, "And that's Robin." The guy still sitting on the couch offered a wave and I smiled back.

Evan looked at me again, stroking his chin with his thumb and forefinger, his brow creased as if he was deep in thought. "So *you're* Dani, then. I've heard a lot about you."

I eyed Connor. "Have you been talking badly about me?"

Connor pursed his lips and inclined his head slightly. "Define 'badly'."

Putting a hand over his mouth, Evan widened his eyes in mock horror. "Oops, I wasn't supposed to say anything, was I?"

"Anything about what?" I tried not to laugh.

"Oh, wait," Evan said. "Maybe she wasn't the one you told me about."

Connor rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay—"

"I mean, she doesn't look like the type to wear a strap-on—"

"Connor Graham!" I smacked him playfully. "You *told* him about that?"

Connor glared at both of us, then rolled his eyes again. He tugged at my arm, trying to lead me out of the living room. "All right, you, I don't want him filling your head with dirty thoughts."

"No more than you already—"

He clapped a hand over my mouth. "And that's enough out of you." Pulling me down the hall, he said, "Good night, Evan, Robin."

"Good night, you two," Evan called after us, chuckling on his way back to the couch to rejoin Robin.

I laughed against Connor's hand as he half-dragged me down the hall. In the bedroom, he released me, and I feigned innocence as I said, "But I was having fun talking to him."

"Yes, I know you were." He put his hands on my waist and kissed me. "Entirely too much fun."

"You just want to be the one filling my head with dirty thoughts, don't you?"

"You're damn right I do." He put his arms around me and kissed the side of my neck. "Actually, I'd rather act out

those dirty thoughts."

"Hmm, but then I might not be able to be quiet."

"I'll make sure you do." Before I could respond, he kissed me. As soon as he did, need replaced playfulness. Enough bantering. We both knew what we wanted.

Moving slowly across the room to his bed, we left a trail of shoes and clothing behind us. He tried my bra strap. Tried again. He cursed in between kisses, so I reached back and unsnapped it with ease. Once it was loose, he slid it down my arms and dropped it aside. Then he cupped my breast, running the pad of his thumb back and forth across my nipple. When I released a soft moan, his kiss deepened. Intensified. A hand on the back of my neck kept me close to him, but I wasn't going anywhere, not when he kissed me like that.

A low growl emerged from his throat, vibrating against my lips, and he pulled me even closer. This long, desperate kiss kept us from making more than the softest of sounds, but it was self-defeating: The more we kissed like this, the more aroused we became, and the less either of us would be able to stay quiet.

Breaking that kiss didn't help, especially not when Connor leaned me up against the bed and pressed his cock into my hip. He made matters worse when he gathered my hair in one hand and swept it over my shoulder while he kissed the other side of my neck. His hand stroked my hair once before continuing down to my chest and there it paused to tease my nipple again.

Our eyes met, and his darted toward the bed, then back to mine. No words were needed. We got into bed and quickly picked up where we left off.

Though he kissed and touched me just the same as he had a moment ago, I was coming unglued. We weren't just fooling around and teasing each other. We were in his bed. All he had to do now was put on a condom. Then I could have him, and I could find out just how difficult it would be to stay quiet with him deep inside me.

Connor wasn't in any hurry, though. As soon as his hand left my breast, starting a slow, gentle downward motion, I knew what he had in mind, and I could barely breathe. His fingers crested my thigh, then slipped between



my legs, gently parting them. Two fingers slid inside me and he pressed the heel of his hand against my clit, circling gently with each slow, beckoning stroke.

"Jesus, Connor..." I sucked a breath in through chattering teeth. "That's—"

"Shh," he whispered, kissing the underside of my jaw while his fingers continued teasing me.

"I can't stay quiet when you're doing that."

"Do you want me to stop?"

*Yes. Wait, no. Don't... I... I can't think when you breathe on me like that... and touch me like that... and...*

He grinned against my neck. "Just tell me to stop and I will."

"Don't you dare."

A breath of laughter tickled my skin. "Then you'll just have to stay quiet."

"I... can't..."

"You can. We have to," he murmured beneath my ear. "So they don't hear all the things I'm doing to you." His fingers slipped inside me, making one long, slow stroke over my tingling G-spot before going back to tease my clit.

I bit back a whimper that might very well have become something much louder. I wanted him to stop teasing me and let me come, but if he did, staying quiet would be out of the question. And he was doing it on purpose, using his mouth and fingers to orchestrate unbearable levels of frustration.

"I love all the sounds you make," he whispered in my ear. "But I want them all to myself." Amusement added a lilt to his voice, *almost* masking the unsteadiness that announced his own waning control. "I know it's hard to stay quiet. God only knows when you touch me, it's hard not to let the whole damned city know about it."

The whimper escaped this time, but he muffled my voice with a deep kiss before it got too loud. His fingers slipped into my pussy again, this time staying there, moving back and forth across my G-spot while the heel of his hand pressed against my clit. My hips pushed back, moving with his hand, seeking more as every touch and tingle became more intense than the last. Only his kiss kept me from crying out, and just when I reached the very precipice of control,

his mouth left mine. Before I could protest, he spoke, making matters even worse.

"I've been waiting all day to hear you come," he said, his lips brushing mine. "But since I can't—" A little harder. A little faster. "—I'll just have to settle for *feeling* you come."

And just before I came, he kissed me again, the taste of his mouth simultaneously keeping me silent and driving me over the edge. Since I couldn't cry out, the energy that would have been released in my voice flooded my veins instead, intensifying my orgasm, nearly levitating my body off the bed while Connor held me and kissed me and just. Wouldn't. Stop.

When it became too much, I searched blindly for his hand, finding and grasping his forearm. As soon as I did, he stopped, and I finally managed to draw a breath.

"Condom," I whispered.

He kissed me again, then reached over me, but the drawer was too far away.

"I'll get it," I said.

"I hope you don't think I'll keep my hands off you while you do."

"Be my guest." I winked, then rolled onto my side and reached for the nightstand. As I did, he ran his hand over my hip and down my leg. With his fingertips drifting up the back of my thigh, the simple task of fishing a condom out of the drawer suddenly became herculean, something almost too complicated for my mind and fingers. I finally managed to get one free, though, but when I tried to roll onto my back, he stopped me with a gentle hand on my hip. Then his body was against my back, his hard cock so, so close to my pussy.

"Stay just like this," he whispered, kissing behind my ear. The hand on my hip moved to my elbow and slid down to my wrist. He gently freed the condom from my fingers. "Don't. Move."

"I won't."

"Good." He kissed the back of my shoulder, then shifted slightly. Foil tore. I bit my lip when a preemptive shudder nearly made me moan. Then, with his knee, Connor nudged mine forward, bending it just slightly while he guided his cock to me.

He pushed into me slowly. Even though he could only

go so deep, this angle was perfect. The head of his cock slid back and forth across my G-spot, and I had to dig my teeth into my second knuckle as every stroke made silence a little less possible.

"My God, you are so fucking tight like this," he murmured. "You feel incredible. Oh God..." His voice shook, edging toward a deep groan.

"Shh," I whispered. "We have to stay... oh my God... we..."

"Fuck, I can't," he said in a hoarse whisper. "You just feel too damned—" Stubble grazed my shoulder when he buried his face against my neck. A low growl resonated across my skin. Another, this time louder.

"Connor," I whispered. "We can't—"

"I know, but I..." Trembling, he sucked in a breath, and I wondered if he was about to lose it.

"Connor," I said, trying to keep him here. "Don't—"

"Oh... God..." He moaned and his cock twitched inside me. In that moment, I discovered that there existed few things in this world that were sexier than Connor releasing a hot, shuddering breath of near-silent surrender into my hair.

He held on for dear life until the last tremor had come and gone. Slowly, he loosened his grasp on my hip. Then he sighed and let his hand drift up between my breasts.

"And I thought *I'd* have trouble staying quiet," I said.

He chuckled. "I should have known I wouldn't be able to."

"You managed."

Another warm breath of laughter. "Another few seconds, and Evan and Robin would have heard *exactly* how good your pussy feels."

I shivered.

Nuzzling the back of my shoulder, he said, "If you stay the night, I'll buy you breakfast in the morning."

"Hmm," I said. "I think you just want me in your bed so you can take advantage of me during the night."

"So is that a yes?"

"Do you promise to take advantage of me?"

"At every possible opportunity."

"Then yes."

## ***Eleven***

Somewhere in the night, the feeling of being someplace foreign cut through the fog of exhaustion and I drifted into consciousness. My eyes fluttered open, and unfamiliar patterns of light and shadow sent just enough panic through me to rouse me completely. I jerked awake, but in seconds, remembered where I was.

Beside me, Connor stirred. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"I was already awake." He moved closer to me, molding his body against mine and resting his hand on my arm. "I thought I woke you."

"No, it wasn't you," I said. "But, why are you still awake?"

"I have been for a while. One of the joys of being an insomniac."

"I didn't know you were an insomniac."

"That's because you were asleep."

"Smartass," I laughed. "What keeps you awake?"

"I just don't sleep well. Never have." He ran his fingers up and down my arm and kissed the back of my shoulder. "But I could think of worse things than being awake when I've got a beautiful, naked woman in my bed." His hand drifted down my side to my hip. "In fact, now that you're awake..."

"You're going to take advantage of me?"

"Absolutely." The hand on my hip tugged gently, and he moved aside enough to let me roll onto my back.

"You really are insatiable, aren't you?"

"Mm hmm," he murmured against my neck. "I blame you."

"Me?" I gasped at the brush of coarse stubble over my collarbone. "I'm not the one who was lying awake thinking impure thoughts."

"Which I wouldn't have been doing," he said, pausing to kiss my neck, "if you hadn't been here."

"So I was keeping you awake, then."

"No." His hand slipped between my thighs. "I was already awake. But I wouldn't have been thinking all these impure thoughts if you weren't here."

"I doubt that," I said when he raised his head to kiss me. "Your mind is a dirty, dirty place whether I'm here or not."

"Can't argue with that." His fingers slipped inside me and his palm pressed against my clit. "But having you right here doesn't help matters at all."

"Oh, I don't know." I wrapped my fingers around his cock and stroked gently. "I think I'm helping matters now, am I not?" I couldn't see his face now, but I'd already memorized the way his brow furrowed when he gasped like that, or the way his lips pressed tightly together when he stifled a groan.

If he had a witty comeback on his mind, he let it go and kissed me instead. The more he kissed me, the more I stroked his cock. The more I stroked him, the more he teased my pussy. The more he teased me, the more I kissed him.

It was a gasp that finally separated our lips, and that gasp was mine. My hand's motions faltered, my ability to breathe fell apart, and my entire universe centered around this maddening need for release. With little more than his fingertips, he brought me to the edge, held me there, and wouldn't let me go, wouldn't let me exhale, wouldn't let my spine return to the bed.

And just as easily as he'd brought me to and held me in that limbo between insanity and ecstasy, he let me go. His lips would have silenced any cry I might have released, but I made no sound for him to silence. All I could do was tremble.

He withdrew his fingers slowly, and with one last, brief kiss, broke contact and leaned away. Through the lingering

haze of sleepiness, I almost pleaded with him to come back, but the rattle of the nightstand drawer told me what he was doing.

The need for sleep still pulled my at my eyelids and clouded my mind, but my need for him kept me here. I realized then that it wasn't just Connor who was insatiable. I wasn't used to wanting a man like this. The more I had, the more I wanted, and if that meant having him in the dead of night when I should have been sleeping, I wasn't going to argue.

The wrapper tore. After a few seconds, Connor cursed under his breath. "Hate these fucking things," he muttered. "Especially in the dark."

"I think they make glow-in-the-dark condoms."

He snorted with laughter. "That's just what we need. Now get over here."

I got on top and lowered myself onto his cock, my eyes rolling back and watering as my pussy yielded to him. Only a few hours, if that, had passed since I'd had him inside me, but that first stroke always took my breath away.

I rode him with a slow, smooth rhythm, and he reached up to touch my face. His fingers moved into my hair and he drew me down to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around me and his hips rose and fell with mine, and for all we'd struggled to stay quiet earlier, silence simply happened this time. We moved together, bodies and mouths, and anything louder than the bed's muffled protests or the whispers of skin on skin and bedclothes would have spoiled it.

A low growl came from the back of his throat and stopped at my lips. His fingers tightened in my hair and dug into my back, and every breath was shorter and sharper than the last. A shiver arched his back and broke the kiss just long enough for him to whisper, "Oh God..." and he came.

His body relaxed and he exhaled, warm breath rushing past my skin while he kissed me. He stroked my hair and we both caught our breath. Arousal took its leave, and fatigue immediately moved in, pulling my eyes shut and turning my limbs to lead. Kisses became so lazy and languid that before long, we were simply breathing each other.

I rolled onto my side and Connor quickly took care of the condom. When he came back, he put his arm around me and I rested my head on his shoulder.

"I don't think I'll have any trouble sleeping now," he slurred.

"That makes two of us."

He kissed the top of my head and murmured something I didn't quite understand, but I'd already loosened my grip on consciousness. Before it even registered that he'd spoken, I drifted into darkness.

## ***Twelve***

Just as he promised, Connor took me to breakfast the next morning. The restaurant was a few blocks away from his apartment, so we walked. My hips ached furiously, and I figured the walk would do them some good. I got the impression Connor was also feeling the effects of another hot night together, especially since he didn't walk quite as fast as he usually did. I might have blamed that on politeness, thinking he'd slowed his pace on my account—and knowing him, that was probably a factor as well—but the occasional wince or pause to twist a crick out of his back suggested otherwise. He also hadn't bothered to put his contacts in, wearing his thin-framed glasses instead.

On the way, I couldn't help but notice the vast and varied array of restaurants nearby: Indian, Thai, a Russian deli, at least three coffee shops.

"Could you have gotten a place any closer to all these restaurants?" I laughed on our way up the sidewalk.

He chuckled. "Why do you think I got an apartment here? I think I've been to every restaurant within a six block radius at least a dozen times."

"Must be nice," I said. "I seem to have gotten a place on the 'dorm food and takeout' end of the U-district."

"Pity. There's a lot of good food to be had in that area." He slipped an arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. "But if you like places like this, you're more than welcome to hang around my apartment." I glanced at him and he winked.



"Are you suggesting you want me to stay the night more often?"

"As long as you promise to do everything you did last night," he said.

"Likewise."

"Deal."

We exchanged grins and kept walking. When we rounded the corner, a Vietnamese restaurant came into view.

"You're walking distance from a Phở place?" I clicked my tongue. "That's it, I'm never leaving your apartment."

He laughed. "You like Phở, then?"

"Are you kidding? I love it."

"Good to know," he said. "We'll have to go there sometime. That place is great."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

He smiled. "Good. Because I fully intend to follow through with it." He pulled me a little closer. "Assuming you don't mind seeing me again."

"Don't mind?" I shot him an incredulous look and laughed. "After last night?"

"Glad I made an impression."

"Very much so," I said. "Just let me know when and where."

"Hmm, how about my place, as soon as humanly possible?"

"I think I can swing that."

"Good." He yawned. "Thank God this place has some strong coffee. I think I need it."

"You're not the only one."

"I suppose we could have slept in," he said. "It's only, what, nine thirty?"

I looked at my phone. "Thereabouts. But staying in bed would have meant, well, staying in bed."

"Which is a bad thing because...?"

"Well, you did promise to buy me breakfast."

He gestured dismissively. "This place serves breakfast all day."

"Then what the hell are we doing out of bed?" I instantly clapped my hand over my mouth, my cheeks on fire when I realized I'd said it quite a bit louder than I'd intended.

He snorted with laughter. "Listen, I know my roommate's out of earshot now, but—"

"Connor."

"That shade of red looks great on you, by the way."

"Shut up."

He laughed. A moment later, we stopped in front of a small café. He held the door open, then put his hand on the small of my back when I walked past. Our playful banter continued through breakfast and countless cups of coffee. Eventually, the waitress just left a pot of coffee on the table, which we went through in fairly short order.

After he finished another cup, Connor glanced at his watch and cursed under his breath. "I'd probably better let you go."

I looked at my phone and nodded, ignoring the disappointment sinking in my gut. "Yeah, I should probably get to work."

"On a Sunday?"

"No rest for the wicked," I said. "I'm allowed to take the weekends off, but I've got three horses that *have* to be worked today, or they're going to be hell on wheels tomorrow."

"Sounds like you have your hands full. I've got my thesis defense coming up. I didn't get a damned thing done yesterday, but I do need to work on it today."

"Guess we'll both have our hands full today, won't we?"

"Yeah, I guess we will." To the waitress, he said, "Check, please?"

After he'd paid for breakfast, we left the café and walked back to his apartment. Standing beside my car, we let a goodbye kiss turn into several, and each felt less like "goodbye" than the last.

Eventually, Connor said, "God, I wish you could stay a bit longer."

"Well, I *could* stay a bit longer..."

He stroked my hair and smiled. "And you and I both know we'd be at it until the sun went down if we got started."

"That's a bad thing?"

"It is if we have anything else we need to get done."

I trailed a fingertip across the back of his neck, making him shiver when I said, "My priorities are suddenly shifting."

"Are they, now?"

"They are."

"Won't all those horses be hell on wheels tomorrow if you don't work them?"

I smiled. "Probably. But I can handle them. Question is, can you handle me if you let me go too long without another night like last night?"

"You dirty, dirty tease," he growled, pulling me into another kiss that said anything but "goodbye". When he broke that kiss, he rested his forehead against mine and exhaled.

"I guess I should go," I said.

"I know." He paused. "Now, I know this is going to keep me from getting anything done today, but it's the only way we're ever going to go anywhere. Do you have any plans tonight?"

"What if I don't?"

"Could I talk you into making some plans?"

I shrugged. "I think I could be persuaded."

He pursed his lips for a second. "Tell you what, I'll let you go for now, we can both get everything done that we need to do, then I'll call you later this afternoon. Maybe around five?"

"I should be done with the horses by then. Might be closer to six or seven, though."

"Works for me." He smiled and kissed me, lightly this time. "Just in case you're still working, instead of calling, I'll send a Connorgram."

I laughed. "A Connorgram?"

"A text." He winked.

"And why do I get the feeling that a 'Connorgram' is going to be dirtier than a normal text message?"

He trailed a fingertip up the side of my neck. "You already know me far, far too well, my dear."

~ \* ~

Xena wasn't my favorite horse to ride, but at least she was in a pliable mood today. She took the jumps with minimal resistance. Her lead changes were right on the

mark, even if she did swish her tail and pin her ears when she did it. She only refused three jumps, which was pretty damned good for her.

After clearing three jumps with perfect form, I slowed her to a trot, then a walk, and patted her neck while I let her catch her breath.

*There. At least this ride's out of the way.* Xena's sour demeanor aside, I wasn't overly fond of jumping anyway. I would have been perfectly content to ride nothing but dressage horses, but training jumpers was part of my contract. It was my experience with them that got me this job over another dressage trainer who'd never jumped, so I couldn't complain.

When I was done with Xena, I rode Jester just to give myself a break from the more difficult creatures. He and Calypso were always good for clearing my head, especially when the next horse on my list was Dante, the ex-racehorse that would be the death of me. I groaned to myself while I led Jester down the aisle to put him away. As much as I enjoyed challenging project horses, Dante had the two-pronged obstacles of two years on the track and a year with an abusive trainer. Not only did I have to undo all of his racing training, but he was scared of his own shadow, anything that moved and anything that didn't move.

"Challenging" didn't even begin to describe him.

With as tired as I was, working with Dante was going to be interesting, but he'd already had one day off this week. Worse came to worse, I'd keep this session fairly simple. A few trotting and cantering circles. Some half-halts. Some—

"Oh Christ," I muttered.

Gina, Dante's owner, stood beside his door with her back to me. I'd forgotten she was coming to watch him today. So much for a simple lesson.

"Hey Gina," I said.

She turned and offered a half-hearted smile. "Hey Dani."

"What's up?"

She sighed, scratching Dante's forehead. "I was just thinking about whether or not I'm wasting my time with him."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, I'm wondering if I should even bother doing dressage with him." She stroked the side of his muzzle.

"He's got potential, Gina," I said, ignoring Jester tugging at my shirt like a toddler trying to get his mother's attention. "It's just going to take some time. I mean, no matter what discipline you want to use him for, we still have to undo all the poor training he had before."

"Do you think he has potential, though?" she asked. "It just seems like it's always two steps forward and three steps back with him."

"I know," I said. "But between the bad training and the abuse, that's just par for the course. He's come a long way."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he—" I paused when Jester pushed his head against me, nearly knocking me off-balance. "Jester, Mommy's talking. Do you mind?" He looked at me with those big eyes. Puppy dog eyes had nothing on his "who, me?" look.

"Like little kids, aren't they?" Gina laughed.

"Probably doesn't help that I baby him." I smiled and tousled Jester's forelock, which seemed to pacify him for a second. Nodding toward Dante, I continued. "Anyway, he used to freak out whenever he saw his reflection in the mirror in the arena, but now he goes right by it. Doesn't even notice. When I put poles on the ground for him to walk over, he used to act like they were going to jump up and bite him, but now he just hesitates a little."

"Good." Gina patted her horse's neck. "That's good to hear. Gavin thinks he'll be ready for that show over in Wenatchee. Do you think he will?"

Inwardly, I cringed. Though Dante was progressing in leaps and bounds, he hadn't leapt or bounded quite far enough for me to even consider competing with him. But the boss had spoken, and if I went behind his back, all hell would break loose. At least he knew better than to sign Dante up for the show on Whidbey Island; trailering that horse was bad enough without putting him on a ferry.

I sighed. "Don't expect a championship out of him, okay? Let's go into that show as a training experience for

him. Get him acquainted with all the noise and scary things. I think he'll make it through it, but realistically, I don't think he'll be very competitive yet."

She scowled. "Really?"

"That's the honest truth." I pushed Jester's nose away from my pockets, which he alternately nibbled and tried to search for candy or grain. "It'll be good for him, though. Sooner or later, he's going to have to get used to show grounds. Might as well be now. By the time he's ready to compete, he'll be a seasoned pro at dealing with loudspeakers, crowds, that kind of thing."

"Oh," she said. "Well that does sound like a good idea then. What about trailering him?"

"That's going to be a challenge too, but we'll practice. We have time." Tugging at Jester's lead rope, I said, "Let me put this brat away, then I can go ahead and put Dante through his paces."

My ride with Dante went smoothly, thank God. After Gina left, I glanced at my phone and couldn't help but be relieved that I'd killed nearly two hours between talking to her and riding him. That was two hours closer to—

"Jesus, Dani," I muttered to myself. Just a few nights with Connor, and I was hooked. I couldn't help but smile while I let my mind wander back to last night. I'd had great sex in the past—that was one thing I couldn't complain about with Matt—but nothing like this. Connor left me simultaneously satisfied and hungry for more.

Just a few more hours to go, and I could have him again. It was probably just as well I had a few hours to recover. I was exhausted from all the things we'd done in lieu of sleeping. Every yawn and every twinge in my hip reminded me of everything he'd done to me, and the aches and fatigue were well worth it. Just a few more hours. A few more—

"Hey, Danielle!" My boss's barking voice shook me out of my reverie.

I turned around, raising my eyebrows in an unspoken, "Yes?"

He stood beside Xena's stall with Leslie. He gestured sharply at the horse. "Did you already work her this morning?" he demanded.

"Yeah, I rode her a couple of hours ago, why?"

He cursed under his breath. "Didn't I tell you I was going to start riding her?"

*Oh, great, that'll make her so much easier to work with.* Resisting the urge to roll my eyes and get myself fired, I said, "You did, yes, but I didn't know you wanted to ride her today."

"You didn't ask, did you?" he snapped.

"Gavin, honestly." Leslie shook her head and patted his arm. "It's not that big of a deal. Just ride her tomorrow." To me, she said, "Is that okay, Dani?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine," I said.

Gavin took a sharp breath, his shoulders tensing as if he was about to release one of his usual tirades. Then he looked at her and, after a second, relaxed. To me, he nodded. "Okay, sure. That's fine."

Leslie smiled at him, and damned if he didn't return it. A foul mood dissolved as if by magic. *And thank God for that.*

The three of us briefly discussed an upcoming show. Leslie asked for my input about easing Stetson, a gelding recovering from a torn suspensory ligament, back into his training regimen. Then the two of them left me to finish my rides.

I watched them walk out of the barn, laughing and chatting about something I couldn't hear. Shaking my head, I went to get Orion out of his stall. *I don't know how you do it, Les.* That woman had the patience of a saint to put up with him, and I was thankful every day that she did. She had a calming effect on him like no one else. Without Leslie, Gavin would have been completely unbearable.

With my bosses out of my hair, I went back to working horses. In no time flat, I was done, and by the time all of my rides were out of the way, there was still time to kill before the end of the day. I considered going home to get a head start on cleaning myself up so I was ready to go when Connor texted me, but there was only so much preening I could do before boredom set in. Knowing me, I'd make the wait even longer by staring at the clock, trying to will my phone to ring, and simply waiting.

Instead, I jumped at the opportunity to take care of tedious, menial tasks around the farm. Cleaning bridles for a

show that was weeks away. Organizing a tack trunk. *Not* checking my watch every five minutes.

Around six, my phone beeped and my pulse jumped. Just as I'd hoped, it was a Connogram.

*So what would it take for me to talk you into my bed tonight?*

Biting my lip and glancing around to make sure no one had materialized behind me to read over my shoulder, I sent back three simple words:

*You just did.*



## ***Thirteen***

A week or so later, a birthday drew Susan and Connor's mutual friends to the Pike Street Pub again. He was driving straight from work but I took a cab from my apartment. I wasn't planning on drinking much, but it was a safe bet that we'd only need one vehicle when we made our escape at the end of the night.

On my way to the pub, my sister Mary called.

"Hey, how's it going?" I asked.

"Not bad, just calling to check up on you."

"Just what I need."

She laughed. "Well someone has to keep you out of trouble."

"You can't do that from a thousand miles away, my dear." I rifled through my purse for cash to pay the driver. "Especially not when I've got someone here to help me *make* trouble."

"Oh dear God, you've got another man already?" She clicked her tongue. "Danielle, you tart."

"Hey now," I said. "It's been months. More than enough time."

"Okay, except that last time I talked to you, you weren't exactly over Matthew McDumbass."

"That's because I hadn't met Connor yet."

"Ooh, he even has a sexy name." She giggled.

"You should see him in the flesh."

"And I'm sure you've seen plenty of—"

"*Mary.*"

"What? I'm just saying."

"Yeah, uh-huh." The cab pulled to a stop in front of the Pike Street Pub and I handed the money to the driver before I got out.

"Okay, so tell me all about him," she said. "At least skip the filthy bits and tell me he's nothing like that slurping douchecock you used to call a boyfriend."

"Gee, Mary, tell me how you really felt about Matt."

"Well, let's see, I—"

"That was rhetorical."

She huffed. "Fine. He was an asshole and we'll leave it at that. Anyway, Connor. He's nothing like Matt, I hope?"

"Not even close." I glanced up and down the street, but Connor was nowhere in sight yet.

"So do you think this might go anywhere?" she asked. "I mean, does he have, you know, potential?"

"Not a chance." I smiled at my own confidence that I could so easily walk away from this.

"What? Then why are you—" she paused. "Oh. Booty call."

"Exactly," I said. "And there's no pressure for it to go anywhere because he's leaving in a few months."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah, going to California for grad school."

Mary laughed. "What is it with you and graduate students?"

"No kidding." I shook my head, laughing to myself. Part of the reason Matt came to Seattle was to pursue his own graduate degree, something he could just as easily have done in Cheyenne. But he needed that whole change of scenery, so he'd packed up and moved. I sighed. "Guess I like the intellectual type with loads of student loan debt."

"Apparently. And maybe, unlike *someone*, this guy has a brain for something other than academics."

"Oh, he does, believe me," I said with a grin.

"Good God, Dan, you are shameless. So what happens if you don't want to let this guy go?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "He's moving in August. Isn't much I can do to hold him here."

"Yeah, but is there any chance you'll go with him?"

"No, no, of course not." I laughed, but it came out with much less enthusiasm than I expected. "It's just a little

fling. He's fresh out of a relationship, I'm fresh out of a relationship, and I'm not following another guy to another state."

"So, once you've finished having your way with Connor, what then?"

"I find someone else to have my way with, of course." My confidence waned a tad. I could get over him, but he'd made my dating future significantly more complicated. The sexual satisfaction bar had been raised, and I doubted that men who could satisfy like Connor Graham were easy to find.

"Have you thought about coming back to Cheyenne after Connor leaves?" Mary asked.

I sighed. "I've thought about it, but it's not going to happen unless I hit the lottery." Homesickness pulled at my chest. "I want to, though. God, I miss it."

"Is it that expensive?" she asked. "I mean, a U-haul or a plane ticket—"

"The horses." I shifted my weight, staring at the pavement at my feet. "I can move myself, but I can't afford to move them."

"Have you thought about—"

"I'm *not* selling them."

"Dan, if you're miserable in Seattle, it might be worth considering."

I ran a hand through my hair and exhaled. "That would be like asking you to sell your children. They're all I have. I'm not selling them."

"Point taken." She sighed. "I just miss you."

"I know," I said. "I miss you too. And if it weren't for them, I'd be back by now, believe me."

"Still not crazy about Seattle?"

"I like it okay." I shrugged for no one's benefit but my own. "It's just not Cheyenne. Aside from the horses, I have no reason to stay here."

"Except Connor."

"Right," I said. "Connor, who's leaving in a few months *and* is just a friend with benefits."

"For the moment, anyway."

"No, this is how it's going to stay. I mean, he's leaving. I couldn't get attached to him if I wanted to."

"Doesn't mean you won't."

"I told you, I won't."

She was quiet for a second. "We'll see about that."

"Mary, I'm serious. Like I said, he's fresh out of a relationship, I'm still getting over Matthew McDumbass as you so eloquently dubbed him, and Connor's moving away anyway."

"Sure you won't want to go with him?"

"Absolutely. I've already done that with one guy, I'm not doing it again."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it. Her tone was laced with skepticism. "Well, either way, I'm glad to hear you're with someone who's not a complete asshole."

"Yeah, me too."

Footsteps behind me turned my head. Connor and I made eye contact and my stomach fluttered when he smiled.

To Mary, I said, "He's here, I have to go."

She giggled. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Whatever," I said. "Love you, sis."

"Love you too."

I hung up and dropped the phone into my purse just as Connor's hands touched my hips.

I turned around and he said, "Long time no see."

I smiled. "Much too long."

When he kissed me, a tingle of panic worked its way into my gut. As much as I wanted to convince myself I'd never follow another man, there were times when his kiss made me swear I'd move to the ends of the Earth at his whim.

This was one of those times.

Slow and gentle, as was his custom, with a hand in my hair and the other on my hip, he pressed his lips to mine and brought the world to a halt. The kiss deepened, and with the persuasive warmth of his mouth against mine, there wasn't much I wouldn't have done if he'd asked me just then.

When we separated, we both exhaled and my knees shook as the world shifted back into motion. He grinned, something in his eyes suggesting he knew exactly what he did to me.

"I've been waiting for that all day," he said.

"You're not the only one."

He kissed me once more, lightly this time. On our way

into the pub, he held the door and gestured for me to go first. When I walked past him, he put his hand on the small of my back and followed me into the pub. It wasn't a territorial gesture or an attempt to corral me and keep me close by, just comfortable contact.

We stopped beside one of the high tables, hanging back from the rest of the group while we got ourselves situated and ordered drinks.

"What are you drinking?" Connor pulled his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans.

"Mac and Jack's."

He smiled. "I should have known. Stay here, I'll be right back." He kissed me on the cheek and disappeared into the thin early evening crowd at the bar. While I waited for him, I looked around the room to see if I recognized any other faces from the last time. Though a few were familiar, I couldn't put names with all of them. Susan acknowledged me with a nod and wave, but she was wrapped up in a conversation with a goateed guy who probably had more tattooed skin than not. On the other side of the room, Kyle caught my eye while he shot pool with some of the other guys. He didn't notice me, or if he did, he gave no sign. I wondered if he even remembered meeting me before.

A hand touched my shoulder and I turned, expecting to see Connor with our drinks, but to my surprise, it was Troy.

"Dani," he said. "I thought that was you."

My smile was tight-lipped. "Yep, it's me."

He shifted his weight and dropped his gaze for a second. "Listen, um, we got off on the wrong foot last time. I, um, I wanted to apologize for that."

"Don't worry about it." I offered a somewhat more genuine smile. "Really."

"I'd like to make it up to you," he said. "Could I, um, could I buy you a drink? Mac and Jack's, right?"

"Good memory. But, no thanks."

"Are you—"

"Mac and Jack's?" Connor appeared beside me, glass in hand. When Troy's posture stiffened, amusement curled Connor's lip.

"Thank you," I said, taking my beer.

"Well, anyway," Troy's voice was colder than the drink in my hand. "I just wanted to apologize for last time. I'll see you around." With that, he quickly walked away.

"Huh, how strange." Connor tilted his head and furrowed his brow as if in deep thought. Then he shrugged and sipped his beer.

"What?"

"Troy's usually such a friendly guy, and he didn't even say hello to me." He glanced at me and winked. "Can't imagine what his problem is."

"You know, I should go thank him," I said.

Connor raised his eyebrows. "For?"

"Well, if Susan hadn't wanted to hook me up with him, I wouldn't have been here the night we met," I said. "And if he hadn't been such a dick to me, we wouldn't have met."

He grinned. "Maybe I should go thank him, then."

"I don't know," I laughed. "He looks pretty pissed off. Might take a swing at you."

"He's just jealous." He gave a flippant shrug. Then he set his beer down and leaned closer to me, speaking just loud enough for me to hear. "After all, when tonight's over, he's not the one who will be tasting you when you come."

A shiver ran up my spine and I took in a sharp breath. He laughed and kissed my cheek.

"You think I'm kidding?" he asked.

"Not at all," I said. "I just didn't realize you were feeling quite so frisky tonight."

"And you're not?"

"Sure I am." I put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him closer, dropping my voice. "Unfortunately, I have to keep it to myself because places like this frown on me pushing you up against the bar and sucking you off."

It was his turn to shiver. He gulped and looked at me with wide eyes. Batting mine, I picked up my beer and took a drink. I'd never been quite so brazen, but he brought it out of me. He brought it out of me, and I liked it.

Sliding his hand around my waist, he let one finger slip between my blouse and my waistband, running along my skin. My breath hitched. In a low growl, he said, "Pity they don't allow things like that, since these barstools are just the right height."

I swallowed, but recovered quickly. "Definitely a pity." I grinned, putting an arm around him and steering us toward the crowd of people we'd come to hang out with. "Especially since I'm not wearing anything under this skirt."

Connor stumbled over his own feet and nearly dropped his beer.

"Easy there," I said. "That's alcohol abuse."

He laughed and took a drink. "And you're a tease."

"Are you accusing me of lying?"

His eyebrows jumped. "You mean you're serious?"

I just smiled.

"Dani, are—"

"Come on." I tugged his arm. "We came to mingle. Let's mingle."

He followed, and just before we were too close to anyone else to keep talking like this, he whispered in my ear, "Just wait until we get home."

We continued this little game throughout the evening. A touch here. A suggestive comment there. Even while we mingled with other people, our secret game of Arousal Tag continued. We kept it subtle, under everyone else's radar, but I was acutely aware of every move he made.

Sitting at the bar, he closed his eyes and took a sharp breath when I drew the toe of my shoe up the back of his calf. After we'd moved to a booth with some other friends, he didn't miss a beat in the conversation when his hand slid under my skirt and teased my inner thigh.

As the night went on, the moves became more subtle, but the responses were anything but. Every time he looked at me, my pulse raced and my temperature rose. When I brushed my fingers across his hand while he spoke, he completely lost his train of thought.

It went from a game of teasing and flirtation to a semaphore of desperation. Between the lines of every move and every comment was a simple message in our own horny version of Morse code, and that message became clearer by the second: *You. Now.*

If this went on much longer, I was going to be sending him an *S.O.S.* and dragging him down the nearest dark alley.

"I'm going to get another drink." He picked up his empty Coke glass. "You want anything?"

The only thing that stopped me from answering him with total uncensored honesty was the group with whom we were currently chatting. I simply nodded and he went for the bar. Then I excused myself from the conversation and followed him.

I put my hand on his back, the light contact drawing his attention away from flagging down the bartender. When he turned to me, I stood up on my toes so he could hear me. Sliding my hand down his back and into the pocket of his jeans, I whispered, "Let's get out of here."

He gulped. A second later, the bartender appeared. Connor cleared his throat. "I just need to take care of my tab."



## ***Fourteen***

We quickly made the rounds, saying our goodbyes as fast as we could without being impolite. Susan tried to stop me with a conversation about an upcoming horse show, but when my eyes darted toward Connor, she got the message.

"Go, go, get out of here," she said, practically herding us out.

As soon as Connor and I were far enough from the pub's windows to avoid being seen by anyone we knew, we stopped and kissed the way we'd needed to all evening. There was nothing slow or gentle about this kiss; his fingers were in my hair, *gripping* my hair, and the hand on my hip pulled me against him so I could feel just how hard he was.

Gasping for breath, I broke the kiss and whispered, "How far away is your car?"

"Too far," he murmured, dipping his head and kissing my neck. Then he stepped back, closing his eyes and holding my shoulders while he struggled to catch his breath. I wasn't sure if he was trying to keep me from coming toward him or if he needed to hold himself back.

Our eyes met.

Without another word, we both turned and started down the sidewalk. Tapping into some previously unknown well of restraint, I kept my hands off him, forcing myself to wait until we were safely inside my apartment. I was too close to losing control, and if I tasted his mouth one more time, I was going to do something in public that was deemed gravely unacceptable by social protocols.

Up ahead, the Jeep came into view. Connor's arm slipped around my waist and I stumbled. He held me upright, using my misstep as a chance to pull me even closer, and judging by the way he pressed his fingers into my hip, he used me for balance as much as I did him. Usually the very picture of control, he evidently had his limits as well.

He pushed me up against his Jeep, kissing me and pressing his hard cock into my hip. His hand drifted over the front of my shirt and he found my erect nipple through the fabric. He circled it with his thumb and I moaned softly, letting my head fall back.

"Jesus Christ, I can't wait, I want you so fucking bad right now." His voice shook with frustration that bordered on fury. "Dani, you just don't know, you just..." He trailed off, kissing my neck.

"Let's go," I said. "I can't wait either."

Our eyes met again and he looked startled, like he hadn't expected me to be just as insatiably turned on as he was.

He quickly pulled his keys out and looked down, frowning as he tried to find the correct key in his trembling hand. When he did, he unlocked the door and kissed me one more time. "Let's go."

I got into the passenger seat, thankful to be off my unsteady legs before they gave out. How we were going to make it up to my fourth floor apartment, I had no idea, because at this rate, I was going to be lucky to get out of this Jeep before I had to have him.

Connor got in and leaned across the console to kiss me.

"We're never going to get home," I murmured, surrendering to his kiss anyway.

"I know, but I—" Another long kiss. "Fuck, I want you so bad."

"Then let's get out of here."

He stole one last kiss before he sat up and turned the key. He put the Jeep in drive and before he'd even pulled out of the parking space, his hand was on my thigh.

"Are you really not wearing anything under that skirt?" he asked.

"Would I lie to you, Connor?"

He bit his lip as his hand moved up my leg and under my skirt. Every inch he gained made it harder for me breathe, the anticipation of his touch making my head spin faster and faster. When his fingers found my pussy, I moaned, the sound underscored by the low growl that emerged from the back of his throat.

"Oh my God, you're so wet." He made a frustrated sound and the Jeep's engine whined when he accelerated. His fingertips circled my clit, slowly, gently, electrifying nerves that were already drawing me away from sanity. The more he gave me, the more I needed, and I didn't care who saw, who heard, who knew.

"Oh God, Connor, pull over. Pull the fuck over, I need you right—"

"We're almost there." His fingers circled a little faster. "We're—"

"Connor, I'm—" I gasped. Shuddered. "Oh God..."

"You're almost there, aren't you?"

All I could do was moan. I reached back and gripped the headrest, closing my eyes while he kept teasing my clit, kept sending me higher, kept circling, kept pressing, kept—

"Oh... my... God..." My eyes rolled back, my back arched off the seat, and everything went white.

As my climax tapered, Connor pulled his hand away and I opened my eyes just as he turned the Jeep into my apartment parking lot. I bit my lip. We were finally home. Finally here. I could finally have him the way I needed him. He'd already made me come once, but it wasn't enough. My orgasm was intense, but it offered no relief from this fire he'd ignited. Even the aftershocks, the pulses of energy radiating from my clit, seemed to whisper his name.

"We're here." He shifted into park and grinned when he put his hand on my leg. "You okay?"

"I will be shortly," I said, wetting my lips.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

We managed to make it out of the Jeep, across the parking lot, and into the stairwell before we had to breathe each other again. Kissing and holding onto each other, we stumbled up the first two flights of stairs. On the second floor landing, he leaned me against the wall, pinning my wrists beside my head and kissing my neck.

"Fuck, I can't wait another minute," he growled.

"I know, let's—" I whimpered when his stubble brushed the side of my neck. "Connor, let's go."

He kissed my mouth one last time before we started up the next flight of stairs. Somehow we made it up the next two flights, but just before we got to the next, he spun me around and pushed me up against the wall again. We kissed frantically, desperately. My purse fell to the floor beside us, the contents spilling out, but it could wait.

I, however, could not. "Connor," I said, panting between kisses. "Connor, my apartment, it's, we're almost there." I gasped as his erection pressed against me. "The next floor, let's—"

"Too far." He released me with one hand, and my breath caught as soon as that hand went into the inside pocket of his jacket. I knew, I knew, but even still, a shudder rippled from my pussy right up my spine when he held up two fingers with a condom between them.

"You came prepared," I said through chattering teeth.

"You're damn right." He tore the wrapper. "After the first time, I never get anywhere near you without one." We both fumbled with his belt and zipper, and while he put the condom on, I made a quick sweeping glance around the stairwell. Panic fluttered through my chest. Someone could come out at any moment. We could get caught. Someone could find us. We could be seen.

Then Connor pulled my leg up to his waist, and I didn't care if every last tenant in the building stepped into the stairwell.

With his hands supporting my hips, I brought my other leg up and hooked my ankles behind his back. Then I put my arms around his neck and held on.

With one deep thrust, he was inside me.

"Oh God..." He closed his eyes and let his head fall forward. "Oh God..." He withdrew slowly and slammed into me again. His range of motion was limited, but I was so aroused, he met no resistance at all. His body pressed against my clit and his cock slid back and forth across my G-spot.

"You feel so good," I moaned.

"So do—" He gasped.

I couldn't roll my hips or move with him. All I could do was passively let him fuck me, let him drive himself as deep inside me as he could, and it was fast, furious, and incredible. In my arms and before my eyes, the man who was always in control became desperation personified.

I tightened my pussy around him and he sucked in a breath. I did it again and a violent tremor ran through him.

"Fuck, I can't— I'm gonna come," he slurred. "I'm...I'm..." When he came, his back arched and he threw his head back, closing his eyes and releasing a throaty groan that echoed up and down the stairwell. I bit my lip to suppress a whimper; being caught didn't matter. What mattered was watching the king of restraint abandon all good sense because he was just *that* far gone.

When his orgasm subsided, we just held onto each other, letting the aftershocks pass. We tried to kiss, but between shaking and panting, we couldn't.

After a moment, I unhooked my ankles and he guided me down, holding my hips until we were both sure my shaking legs would stay under me. Even after I was on my own two feet, I kept my arms around him and we both used the wall for support.

Resting his forehead against mine, he whispered, "That was fucking amazing."

"Yeah. it was." I kissed him gently. "Now let's go find someplace more comfortable."

He grinned. "I like the sound of that." We straightened our clothes and he took care of the condom, putting it in the trash can on the landing while I knelt to pick up the spilled contents of my purse. When I rose, my knees wobbled, but he put a hand on my arm to steady me.

"Can you make it up the stairs?" he asked.

I nodded. "Can you?"

He put his arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. In a low growl, just like he'd done when he'd made flirty suggestions at the pub, he said, "But we'd better go now because I am dying to make you come again."

## ***Fifteen***

It took another three orgasms on my part and one on his before we were both finally satisfied. He collapsed beside me and for the longest time, we just lay in silence, catching our breath.

Without thinking about it, I moved toward him, lying beside him and resting my head on his chest. He lifted his arm until I got comfortable, then draped it around my shoulders. His thumb moved back and forth on my arm, and at one point, he tenderly kissed the top of my head.

We touched now with a kind of gentleness that didn't belong in the same room as the desperate, rough, sweaty sex we'd just had, but it was there nonetheless. Now that the firestorm of insatiable lust had passed, we touched with tenderness.

After a while, Connor chuckled softly and kissed the top of my head. "Now you see what happens when you tease me all evening."

"You started it."

"I did no such thing."

"Liar," I said. "I'm not the one who started saying filthy things in the pub."

"No, but you did show up wearing that damned skirt."

I turned onto my stomach, propping myself up on my elbows. "So will this happen every time I wear it?"

He smiled and played with my hair. "It just might. Especially when you start talking dirty like you were."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"Just remember," he said. "Turnabout's fair play."

"That's the whole idea, isn't it?"

He laughed. "True, I guess it is."

Conversation meandered from talk about our jobs to our families, just enjoying each other's company. We switched effortlessly back and forth between insatiable lovers to something like friends. More than friends. Too intimate to be casual lovers, too passionate to be friends, and somewhere in that gray area was what we were and what we had no business being.

I pushed those thoughts out of my mind while our conversation wandered into his field of study.

He explained his master's thesis in layman's terms and told me a little more about the graduate program he was going into. Then he shrugged. "It's not that exciting."

"It sounds interesting. I mean, a lot of it's Greek to me, but it must be fascinating to study."

"It is. Like I said before, language is a powerful thing." He paused, wetting his lips slowly. Then he looked at me. "You want to know what piqued my interest in it?"

"Poetry, wasn't it?"

"Well, that caught my attention," he said. "But what hooked me was a letter my sister wrote to me a few years ago."

"Really?"

He nodded. "We had a falling out when we were teenagers. I mean, it was ugly. Drove a pretty big wedge into the middle of the whole family, even after I turned eighteen and moved out of the house."

"It was that big of a feud? When you were kids?"

"It was pretty bad." He turned onto his side, facing me and resting his hand on the small of my back. "Teenagers know everything and, well, we both knew everything there was to know about religion. Of course, we couldn't both be right, and we were screaming at each other from polar opposite ends of the religious spectrum. She's as stubborn as I am, so it just escalated until I moved out." He sighed. "Anyway, we didn't speak for a long time. During my second year of college, she wrote me this letter and more or less begged me for a ceasefire. Said we couldn't both be right, but if there was one thing she couldn't live with, it was knowing her brother hated her."

"Did it work?"

He nodded. "We sent a few e-mails back and forth before we got the nerve to talk on the phone. When we saw each other face to face over the holidays, it wasn't like nothing had ever happened, but it was better. A lot better."

"How do you two get along now?" I asked.

"Just fine. We're best friends now. And, well, it got me thinking. We'd torn ourselves apart with what? Words. Then we patched things up using the very same thing. That got me thinking even more, and I found out about the study of linguistics. When I got back to school after the holidays, I changed my major and never looked back."

"Wow," I said. "The only thing I ever got out of sibling rivalry was a black eye."

"A black eye? Are you serious?"

I laughed. "My sister and I fought like cats and dogs while we were growing up. When I was about fifteen, things finally just got out of control, and we got into a big fight. And I don't mean a girly slap match. I mean a fistfight." I shrugged. "When it was over, we each had a black eye and she had a split lip. Didn't do much for her prom pictures the next weekend, but we stopped fighting after that."

Connor chuckled. "How do you get along now?"

"Oh, same as you and your sister," I said. "We're best friends now. We talk on the phone constantly and she's been begging me to come back to Wyoming. You'd never know we ever didn't get along."

"A little Wyoming diplomacy apparently goes a long way," he laughed.

"Tomboy diplomacy is more like it."

"You? A tomboy?" He chuckled. "Hardly."

"Says the man who's never seen me slinging hay bales or driving a tractor."

His eyes lit up. "You know, I think you just got a hell of a lot sexier."

I rolled my eyes. "You dirty bastard."

"Damn right." He leaned in to kiss me. "The perfect match for a dirty girl like you."

"The perfect match, indeed." I grinned into his kiss. Even as his kiss made me lightheaded, a thought wandered into my mind: *I could get used to this.*



When I broke the kiss, I met his eyes. Neither of us spoke, but I'd never been so blissfully relaxed and comfortable around someone as I was just then. *I could get attached to this.*

My blood turned to ice. *I can't get attached to this.*

His fingertips trailed down the side of my neck and I shivered. *I'm getting attached to this.*

"You okay?" he asked.

"What?"

He played with my hair. "Looked like you were spacing out a bit. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just thinking."

"About?"

I could tell him. I could be honest and let him know the thoughts wandering through my head. But I hesitated. It would scare him off for sure. He'd think I wanted to get clingy.

Or worse, he'd feel the same, and the reality was that we couldn't go there.

Instead, I grinned, pulled him closer, and said, "Just thinking about all the things I still want to do before we go to sleep."

## ***Sixteen***

Matt was on the phone when I arrived, so he invited me in and gave me a "just a minute" gesture.

Stepping into the apartment that had been my home for several months was like stepping onto a different planet. Very little had changed, but this wasn't home anymore. I couldn't believe it ever was. Just crossing the familiar threshold, I felt intrusive. Unwelcome.

At first glance, it was the same aside from the absence of my belongings. When I looked around, though, the differences showed themselves. There were signs of other life here, of someone who was neither Matt nor myself. Someone who had settled in.

Matt hated coffee, but there was an espresso maker on the kitchen counter. In the middle of the table, a houseplant that looked much too healthy to be strictly under his care. The fan of magazines on the coffee table had a few requisite copies of *Field & Stream* and *Maxim*, but otherwise it was too *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* to belong solely to him. The mailing label on the top copy of *Cosmo* had the apartment's address on it, and the letters above it formed an unfamiliar name, but I didn't look long enough to comprehend exactly what her name was.

I swallowed hard. This wasn't my territory anymore, but I couldn't deny that it hurt to see how quickly he'd moved someone else in. No wonder he wanted me to come pick up my stuff. There wasn't room in this apartment for the two of them and pieces of me.

"Sorry about that." Matt snapped his phone shut. "Here, just these two boxes." He gestured at the pair of boxes stacked beside the couch. "I'll help you take them out."

"Thanks." We picked them up and went outside, leaving the crowded apartment behind. Balancing the box on the bumper with my knee, I unlocked the trunk. There wasn't a lot of room amidst saddle pads, boots, bridles, and a huge bucket of Calypso's grain supplement, but we managed to wedge the boxes in. I slammed the trunk and we stood in awkward silence.

"So, um, how have you been?" he asked.

*Getting fucked within an inch of my life almost every night and loving every minute of it.* I coughed. "Good, fine. You?"

He shrugged. "Pretty good." He shifted his weight. "I'm surprised you haven't gone back to Cheyenne yet."

"I'm staying."

He exhaled sharply, his lips twisting into a scowl. "Oh."

I fought the urge to glare at him. "This is a big city, Matt. There's room for both of us."

"Well, yeah, of course. I just figured, you know, since your family is there, and since we're..." He hesitated. "Since we're done, I didn't think you had a reason to stay."

"I can't afford to go back anyway, so it's a moot point," I said through my teeth.

His shoe scuffed the pavement when he fidgeted. "I can help you out. You know, with paying for it. I mean, I did drag you out here. Seems like the least I can do."

"I don't need your help," I growled. Then I shrugged. "And besides, I'm starting to like it here." *Especially now that I've discovered some of the friendly natives.*

He laughed. "You? Liking Seattle?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I said. "And if you thought I wouldn't, why did you ask me to come out here with you?"

He stared at the pavement between us. Neither of us spoke for a moment. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to that question, and had I given myself just a second or two to think about it, I wouldn't have asked in the first place. Evidently he didn't want to answer either,

because he cleared his throat and said, "Well, glad to hear you're doing okay here."

*I'm sure you are.* "I'm getting by."

"Are you, um, are you still working at that place?"

"Same place I've been working since I got here." I didn't know why he felt obligated to make small talk with me. Possessions had been exchanged, I had what I came for, there was no reason to drag this out. I flipped my key ring around my finger. "I'd better get going."

He jumped, as if unsure what to make of that. "Oh. Um. Okay."

*Guess you aren't used to me doing the leaving, are you?* I tapped the lid of the trunk. "Thanks for packing this stuff up for me."

He smiled. "No problem." We looked at each other, both shifting uncomfortably. What parting gesture was warranted for a situation like this? A kiss was definitely out. The thought of a hug made my skin crawl. A handshake seemed almost offensively platonic with someone with whom I'd been so intimate at one time.

Finally, I just said, "Well, I'll see you around."

"Yeah, I'll see you around."

With just a brief exchange of uncomfortable smiles, he went back to his apartment and I got in the car. On my way out of the parking lot, taking the last few pieces of the past to my new home, I glanced in the rearview a couple of times. His apartment building faded into the distance, then disappeared altogether when I turned down a side street.

Maybe jealousy and bitterness were clouding my memory, but I was sure I'd enjoyed being around Matt over the last four years. I was sure that at one time, looking at him made my heart skip. After we broke up, I distinctly remembered pining for him and wanting him back. Today, the sight of him only made me want to leave.

Surely something had attracted me to him in the beginning. And something must have kept me there. Kept me there and brought me here.

Something must have, but hell if I could figure out what it was.

I looked at the clock on the dash. It was almost six, which meant I had just enough time to get home, change

clothes, and head out to meet Connor for dinner. I smiled. Whatever it was that had attracted me to Matt had nothing on all the things that attracted me to Connor.

Still smiling to myself, I glanced in the rearview again and whispered, "Have a nice life, Matt."

## ***Seventeen***

No matter how much we planned and organized things, horse shows always involved a certain level of chaos. If a schedule of all the classes and tests was carefully put together and posted, then tack and equipment would go missing. If all the tack and equipment was accounted for, at least one essential document would be missing for either a horse or rider. If all the paperwork was squared away, the schedule would fall to pieces and we'd all be scrambling to make our test times.

The three-day show on Whidbey Island was no exception, and as a bonus, Gavin was in rare form. More than once, Susan and I were sure the only solution was homicide, but somehow, all three of us survived the weekend.

We were finally on our way home. On the ferry, she and Leslie stayed down on the car deck to keep an eye on the horses in the trailer while I dragged my aching carcass to the main deck. I leaned on the railing outside.

The sun was going down and the wind blowing across Puget Sound was chilly, but it was nothing a zipped-up jacket and Connor's arms around me couldn't deflect.

He'd come up this morning to watch my last couple of tests, and just having him there had shaken some of the show-induced tension out of my shoulders. He had a calming effect on me like no one else, and while every inch of my body ached now, his touch was soothing and relaxing. I wondered how I'd have made it through this particular show

without the spectacular back rub he'd given me between tests a few hours ago.

"Still sore?" He brushed some windswept hair out of my face.

"Probably will be for a day or two." I shrugged. "Par for the course."

"I'm sure."

"So the show didn't bore you to tears?"

He smiled. "Not in the least. I mean, I'm not going to pretend I had a clue what was going on half the time, but I got to watch you ride in those white breeches, so—"

I smacked him playfully and laughed.

"What can I say?" He grinned, running his hands over my hips. "They make your ass and legs look incredible."

My face burned. "Connor, my God," I said, pretending to disapprove. "A soon-to-be master of linguistics, and you still resort to such crassness."

"Yeah, and sometimes being crass gets the point across better than dressing it up in poetic bullshit. I mean, they did make your ass and legs—"

"Connor."

"What?" He batted his eyes. Then he laughed and nuzzled my neck. The scuff of stubble above my collar made me shiver just before he whispered directly into my ear. "Listen, I may know all about the nuances and subtleties of the English language..." He flicked his tongue along the edge of my earlobe. "...but I'm still a man, you're still a woman..." A gentle kiss on the side of my neck. "...and I think I can be forgiven some crassness when I've just spent all afternoon wishing I could take you someplace and do things I can't even put into words."

The goose bumps on my neck had nothing to do with the chilly wind. I'd normally be too exhausted and sore for anything after a show, but if he kept talking like that, I was willing to consider making an exception. "Well, actions do speak louder than words."

"They do," he said. "So I figured when you're feeling up to it again, I can put my crass, devious words into actions."

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I." He kissed me, drawing it out for a

moment.

A quiet beep barely registered above the wind, but Connor jumped. He reached into his coat pocket and when he brought his phone out, the sound was louder, no longer muffled by fabric and leather. His eyebrows pulled together as he looked at the LCD screen. Then his expression suddenly shifted to one of irritation and he rolled his eyes.

"Oh for fuck's sake," he growled. He added something else under his breath, but the wind carried it away. Then he pressed a button on the phone, shoved it back into his pocket, and when he looked at me again, the pleasant Connor from thirty seconds ago was back.

"Someone you don't want to talk to?" I asked.

"It's not you. So, yes, it's someone I don't want to talk to."

"You're such a charmer," I laughed.

"Is it working?"

"Absolutely."

He opened his mouth to speak, but the familiar muffled beep cut him off. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly through his nose when he pulled the phone out again.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered through his teeth.

"Persistent?"

He nodded. "Do you mind if I take this?" Resignation and annoyance tugged at his voice, but the look he gave me was nothing but apologetic.

"No, no, go ahead," I said.

"Thanks." He offered a quick smile. "Shouldn't take long." He stepped away and answered the phone. His back was to me while he spoke, and the wind made sure I heard none of it, but he obviously wasn't happy. More than once, he shook his head or ran a hand through his wind-whipped hair. He paced. Paused. Paced again, making sharp gestures in the air that the person on the other end couldn't see.

At one point, he rested his elbows on the railing and was still. He wasn't speaking then, not even moving except his thumb and forefinger rubbing the bridge of his nose. All at once he came to life with a frustrated sweep of his arm and raised his voice just enough to let me hear the aggravation, but not the actual words.



A moment later, he slammed the phone shut and jammed it into his pocket, pausing to take a deep breath before turning back to me.

"Sorry about that." He looked flustered, though he tried to hide it behind a smile. There was a little bit of extra color in his cheeks, and I couldn't tell if it was from the wind or the call.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Everything okay?"

He gestured dismissively. "Just some crap with—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

He chewed his lip and looked past me with unfocused eyes for a second before meeting mine. "Just, you know, some bullshit with my ex." He shrugged. "I suppose I could just ignore her calls, but this saves me the trouble of deleting seventeen voice messages later."

I blinked. "Are you—"

He laughed. "Okay, I'm exaggerating." Sliding a hand around my waist, he pulled me close and brushed my hair out of my face. "Really, it's nothing." He kissed me lightly.

It puzzled me that she was calling so much and pestering him when she'd been the one to walk out. Maybe she regretted it. Maybe she was begging forgiveness. Without knowing the words to their angry song and dance, I couldn't begin to speculate.

He offered only hints that her call had bothered him, shaking off most of his irritation and returning almost completely to the playful, flirty Connor he was before the phone rang. What that meant, I didn't know. Susan had said he only allowed himself to be read as much as he *wanted* to be read, but the tension in his shoulders, the growl in his voice, and the occasional sharp breath gave away the presence of something beneath the surface.

Whatever it was, however it affected him, I was oddly comfortable with it all. No jealous insecurity. No concerns about another woman stepping into my territory. In fact, the idea of unfinished business between Connor and his ex-fiancée put me at ease in ways it wouldn't have in another time and place.

Whatever had happened between them wasn't over yet, so he was in no position to ask more of me than sex and

friendship. They weren't finished, so we couldn't start. I could relax, let this be what it was, and know that when he left for California in a few months, he'd do so without some piece of me I wasn't willing to give.

I let out a breath and let my guard down.

## ***Eighteen***

While I waited for Connor one night, my sister called.

"So how are things with the new man?" she asked after we'd made some small talk.

"Oh, okay." I lay back on the couch and smiled up at the ceiling.

"Just okay?" Dishes clanked and water ran in the background. I imagined her elbows-deep in soapy water and holding her phone between her head and shoulder.

"Fine, it's going great," I said.

"Well, that's good to hear."

"Funny thing, though, I don't think he's quite over his ex yet."

"Oh?" she said. "How do you figure?" I could almost picture her raising an alarmed eyebrow.

"He hasn't said a word about her, but he looked pretty pissed off when he was on the phone with her the other day."

"Well, she's his ex." Dishes clattered on the other end. "I'd probably be pissed if my ex kept calling too."

"So would I," I said. "But, whatever the case, there's obviously some unfinished business with them."

Mary was quiet for a second. The clinking and clattering stopped, then resumed. "You don't sound overly upset about this, Dan."

"I'm not." I shrugged, even though I knew she couldn't see it. "It's his business, not mine."

"You know, most women would be annoyed if her man had ongoing shit with his ex."

"Most women aren't hoping for something temporary," I said. "I don't want a reason for either of us to get attached. And if his ex is still a problem, then that's just one more reason for us *not* to get attached."

She laughed. "Your mind must be a strange, strange place to live, Danielle."

"Maybe so," I said. "Look, I'm just trying to have a little fun and not get too involved with someone right away."

"So you've said. I can see your point, but what if the two of you do start getting more involved?" she said. "Just because it's not the right time or neither of you is ready for it doesn't mean it won't happen."

"Either way, he's leaving in August."

"Just be careful," she said. "I know you, hon. You fall hard, and I don't want to see you fall flat on your face again."

"I won't, don't worry." I glanced at my watch. "Anyway, he'll be here soon, so I have to go."

"Have fun," she said. "But not too much fun."

I giggled. "I fully intend to have—"

"Goodbye, Dan," she said.

I laughed. "Bye, Mary"

Shortly after we hung up, Connor was at my door, and we left for dinner.

He took me out for Phở that night. I'd only had a passing acquaintance with Vietnamese food when I lived in Wyoming, but had developed a taste for it since coming to Seattle, which was blessed with dozens of such restaurants. Fortunately, Connor shared my addiction to it, so we found a tiny mom-and-pop place in the U-district.

When the steaming hot bowls of noodle soup were laid before us, he shot me a devilish grin.

"So, do you take it with or without the peppers and red sauce?" He gestured at various vegetables and condiments that came with our meal.

I shrugged with one shoulder. "Depends on what else I'm planning on doing with my mouth afterward."

His eyebrows jumped. "Well, in that case, I think I'll lay off the peppers myself."

"Good man," I said. "Actually, I like it as is. Too much hot sauce kills the flavor."

"I'm with you on that," he said. "Though every once in a while, I like it good and hot."

"If I want hot, I'll get Thai."

"You like Thai?"

"Love it."

"Good to know," he said. "There's a place about three blocks from my apartment that is to die for."

I picked up some noodles with my chopsticks. "And why haven't you taken me there yet?"

"Didn't know you were into Thai, but I'll certainly keep it in mind now." He paused to take a drink. "Do you like Japanese?"

"I love Japanese," I said. "Susan got me hooked on sushi, so, blame her."

"Ever had teppanyaki?"

I shook my head. "What's that?"

"That's where the chef cooks the food right in front of you on a big metal grill," he said. "It's half entertainment, half meal, and the food is fucking fantastic."

"I've never had that, no," I said.

"Well, we'll have to change that, won't we?" He smiled.

"Yes, we—" My cell phone rang. I pulled it out of my purse and Susan's name came up on the caller ID. "It's Susan, so it might be about work. Do you mind if I take it?"

"Not at all."

I flipped it open and kept my voice extra low to keep from bothering anyone else. "Hey, what's up?"

"Hey," she said. "Listen, I hate to do this, but could I ask a huge favor?"

"That depends, what do you need?"

"I had to take off from the barn early to take care of some things down in Tacoma with my mom, and I got hung up," she said. "There's no way I'm getting back before midnight, but Mouse still needs his meds."

I suppressed a groan. "Need me to swing by and take care of it?"

"Could you?"

I sighed. Convenient or not, Mouse needed his medication, and Leslie and Gavin certainly couldn't be trusted to do it properly. That, and Susan would do it for me

if one of my horses ever needed it.

"Hold on a sec." Putting my hand over the phone, I looked at Connor. "I need to run by work tonight. Do you mind if we stop there after we're done here?"

"Sure, no problem," he said.

I smiled. "Thanks." To Susan, I said, "Sure, I'll head over there in a little while."

"I owe you big time," she said. "His medicine's in my locker in the tack room. Key is in my saddlebag. You know the drill."

After I hung up, I sighed. "Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Besides, now I get to see where you work."

"A barn, some horses, and a bunch of fences," I said. "Terribly exciting."

He shrugged. "Beats the hell out of a desk surrounded by cubicle walls and even more desks, all under the luxurious glow of fluorescent lights."

I wrinkled my nose. "Good point."

After we finished, we headed out to the barn. I would have preferred to go straight back to my apartment, which was much closer than the barn, but duty called. And I couldn't complain about an extra half hour each way in the car with Connor. I enjoyed his company, and we'd make up for lost time when we got home, I was sure.

When we got to the barn, I flipped the switch and the lights down the center of the aisle came to life. A few horses nickered and murmured, looking over their stall doors to see who was there.

"So, this is it." I made a sweeping gesture around the barn. "This is where I work."

He looked around. "I still say it beats the hell out of working in an office."

"I'll give you that," I said. "I did my time behind a desk. This is my dream job. Anyway, let me take care of Susan's horse and we'll get out of here."

I went into the tack room and fished Susan's locker key out of her saddlebag. As she'd indicated, Mouse's medicine was just inside her locker. I brought it all out and set it beside the cross ties in the aisle. Then I went into Mouse's stall and brought him out.

"Need a hand?" Connor asked.

"Nah, I've got it." I picked up Mouse's foot and knelt, resting his leg across my knee. I took off the protective rubber boot and set it aside, then cleaned around the wounded area with a gauze pad before putting the antiseptic on it and cleaning it again. Fortunately, he was fairly docile when it came to things like this, so aside from trying to chew my belt, he didn't put up much of a fuss. Occasionally, he flinched or tried to pull away, but he could have been a lot worse.

Connor leaned against the wall and watched me. "So what's wrong with his foot?"

"He stepped on a nail." I slid the boot back on and buckled it in place. "Got a nasty abscess, so it needs an antiseptic twice a day."

"An abscess in his foot?" he said. "That sounds pleasant."

"You should have seen it the first day." I screwed the cap on the antiseptic and stood. "It was a mess." To Mouse, I said, "Wasn't it, baby?" He nuzzled me, then tried to eat the antiseptic bottle. I held it out of his reach. "No, that's not for you."

Connor chuckled.

Smiling self-consciously, I said, "Sorry, I always talk to them."

He shrugged, stepping aside so I could lead Mouse back to his stall. "It's just cute to see the softer side of Dani Blake."

I winked at him over my shoulder as I took the horse's halter off. I stepped out of the stall and latched the door. "You've *seen* my softer side."

"You're right, I have, and I like seeing it." He put an arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. "I think I'd like to see it again soon."

"You will." I kissed him lightly. "And as soon as I take care of a few more things, we can get the hell out of here."

"Can't wait," he murmured against my lips.

I picked up all of Mouse's supplies and took them back to the tack room, locking them securely away before depositing the key in Susan's saddlebag. Then I ducked into the wash rack and washed my hands. When I came out,

Connor gestured at the various horses looking out of their stalls.

"So are any of them yours?"

"Two." I gestured with my chin to two stalls a few doors down from the tack room. "Calypso and Jester." Apparently they heard their names, because both of their heads appeared over their stall doors. Jester nickered at me and Calypso eyed Connor with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity.

"These are my babies." Beaming, I gestured at them. "This is Jester. That's Calypso." Connor smiled, but he seemed unsure about approaching them.

I nodded toward the tack room. "There's a coffee can just inside the door. Grab a few peppermints out of it and come over here."

He cocked his head. "Peppermints?"

"Trust me."

He found them and approached warily with the candies in his hand. I took one, unwrapped it, and offered it to Jester, who quickly snatched it out of my hand. Connor's eyebrows jumped, an unmistakable look of "you expect me to do that too?" etched across his face.

"Go ahead," I said. "Give one to each of them and they'll love you forever."

He hesitated, then unwrapped a mint. Both horses pricked up their ears, nickering and leaning against their doors when the cellophane crinkled between Connor's fingers.

I took his hand. "Here, hold it like this. Palm up, completely flat." I gently held his wrist and guided his hand close enough for Jester to sniff it. Connor tensed a little, but didn't make much of an effort to pull away even as the horse picked up the mint.

"They don't bite?" he asked, watching Jester crunch contentedly on his candy.

"These two? God no." I nodded at Calypso, who was bobbing his head and pushing against his stall door, waiting for his own treat. "But you might want to give him that other mint before he has a conniption."

Connor put the second mint on his hand and held it out to Calypso. "So, some of them do bite?"



"Some. There's one a few stalls down that'll take your arm off if you don't watch yourself."

"Duly note—" Calypso suddenly licked his hand and Connor jerked it back. The horse raised his head, eyeing Connor as if he'd lost his mind.

I laughed. "Oh, and they do lick once in a while."

"Thanks for the warning," Connor said, wiping his hand on his jeans.

"Sorry, I guess I'm used to it," I said.

He chuckled. "Par for the course, I assume?"

"Yeah," I said. "Anyway. Now you've met them." I stroked Jester's face, rubbing the center of his forehead with the heel of my hand. "These brats are pretty much the reason I'm still in Seattle. Otherwise I would have gone back to Cheyenne after Matt and I split."

"Really?"

I nodded. "I wanted to go back, but moving them is just too expensive. About the only way I could come up with the money is to sell one of them, and that's not going to happen. They're as close to kids as I'll ever have, so..." I trailed off, smiling and ruffling Jester's forelock.

"They're as—" Connor paused.

I looked at him. "What?"

He cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by 'as close to kids as you'll ever have?'"

I shrugged. "They're all I want. Kids just aren't in the cards for me."

He blinked. "Are you serious?"

Inwardly I cringed. "Never wanted them," I said, trying not to get defensive. "I'm perfectly happy with my animals."

Eyes wide and lips apart, Connor looked utterly stunned. Annoyance rose in my chest. *Please tell me you're not going to go there*, I thought. *Don't start giving me all the lectures that everyone and their mother has already given me about this subject.*

Then he laughed and shook his head. "Wow..."

"What?" I wasn't sure if I should be irritated, but the feeling simmered just below the surface, ready to come out if he stepped into that territory. *Not you, Connor, please, not you. You're the one person who—*

"You don't know how refreshing that is," he said.

"It—" My jaw dropped. "Huh?"

Smiling, he slipped an arm around my waist. "I don't meet many women who are happy without kids and are content to stay that way."

"You mean—" I stared at him. "You don't either?"

He shook his head. "No, never have."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. I don't dislike kids, just don't want any of my own." He paused, biting his lip and avoiding my eyes for a second. When he met them again, he lowered his voice slightly. "And I've taken precautions to make sure it doesn't happen."

Disbelief kept my brain from making the connection right away, but after a moment, it finally did. "You've had a vasectomy?"

He nodded. "Had it done a few years ago and never looked back."

"You don't say." Something uncomfortable settled in my gut. In the back of my mind, I secretly wished he had tried to give me the "you'll change your mind" lecture I'd heard from so many others. Why did he have to be childfree too?

*Damn you, Connor, why do you have to be everything I want in a man except staying?*

"Wait, that means that first night, when we didn't have condoms," I said. "We still could have fucked?"

He laughed. "Technically, yeah. But you'd only known me a few hours. Seemed like a bit much to ask you to trust me enough to go bareback, you know?"

"Fair enough."

He kissed me and whispered, "Though I have to admit, I would have loved to have felt you that way that night."

Wrapping my arms around him, I said, "It's not too much to ask now, is it?"

A grin played at the corner of his mouth. "I don't know, you tell me."

I kissed him. "Maybe we should get out of here."

## ***Nineteen***

In my bedroom, we undressed each other slowly, pausing again and again for a long, drawn out kiss. Even after we'd gotten into bed, we abandoned our usual hungry desperation for this slow, languid touching and tasting. Though I knew he was turned on, that he wanted this as much as I did, he held back and so did I. Unlike our first night together, when we took our time in spite of our desperation, it wasn't the novelty of a new lover that slowed us down this time. There was too much familiarity for that.

His mouth spent an absolute age on each nipple, teasing and sucking to create that perfect balance between pleasure and pain. More than once I wondered if he was going to bring me to orgasm that way. Then he trailed kisses down my side and over my thigh. He made lazy circles around my clit with his tongue, the kind of touch meant to arouse, but not send me over the edge. No, he was in no hurry at all tonight. He was perfectly content driving me insane before he fucked me.

All the while, I tried to ignore the nervousness fluttering in my stomach. I trusted him, I wanted this, but still I wondered if it would change something between us. Or if it already had. We hadn't gone through the motions, but the conversation had been and gone. Did casual lovers have any business trusting each other this much?

It didn't matter. I did, he did, we would.

Connor kissed his way up from my hipbone to my side to my chest. He teased my nipple with his lips and tongue, then moved to the other. All the while, his body slowly

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shifted position, changing from beside me to over me. As his lips moved up to my collarbone, my legs parted for him, and my heart raced with desire and a hint of apprehension.

I forced my nervousness back. *Yes, I want this. I want you like this.*

He slid his hands under my back and kissed my neck as his hips settled against mine. With every touch, though, something changed in the way his lips moved. Hungry kisses became lighter, gentler, almost— yes, that was it: tentative. Hesitant.

So he wasn't just drawing this out to savor the moment, he was hesitating. It was one thing to discuss it in the aisle of the barn, safely separated by clothing while we consented to a hypothetical. But now the clothing was gone and the hypothetical was real. No matter how unshakably confident we both were in bed or how much we trusted each other, this was untrodden ground.

And so we drew this out—touching, tasting, teasing—making each other want more, but not giving more. Quietly challenging each other to make that move, take that step. While I was on top of him, a roll of my hips would have ended this stalemate. When he lay behind me, kissing my neck and shoulders, a single thrust would have finished this. Finished *me*. I wanted him so bad, I was sure I'd come the second he was inside me.

We changed position again, shifting onto our sides and shying away from another opportunity.

There was nothing left between us and no need to *put* anything between us. We were two adults who'd had sex time and time again, so why were we suddenly as shy and hesitant as a couple of teenaged virgins? Maybe we weren't used to skipping the steps of reaching for the nightstand, tearing the foil, and putting the condom on.

We kept turning each other on, kept teasing each other, kept moving toward what we both wanted even while we held back. The temperature rose, but the water refused to boil.

When arousal became frustration, it crossed my mind to reach for the nightstand and put us back on familiar ground.

But I didn't. We'd get there.

I nudged him onto his back and lay on my side next to him. Kissing him deeply, I let my fingers trace a gentle path down his chest, pausing when his abs quivered at my touch. When I wrapped my fingers around his erection, the resulting gasp was as much mine as his. With every stroke of my hand on his hard cock, I wanted him even more.

I found that perfect combination of almost too hard and almost too fast, just the way I knew he liked it. Whispered curses escaped his lips along with short, shallow breaths. His eyes screwed shut while his hips moved with my hand, and I brought him within a gasp of an orgasm before he stopped me with a gentle hand on my wrist.

"Not yet," he breathed. *I want to come inside you*, his eyes added just before he drew me down to kiss him.

Yes, my lips refused to say. *I want you to*.

And still we didn't cross that line. Connor's hand snaked around my neck, cradling it gently as he eased me onto my back. He continued kissing me, moving slowly from my lips to my jaw to my neck. When he started down my chest, I had to bite back a whimper, and I wasn't sure if it was impatience or anticipation.

He kissed my inner thigh, letting his stubble brush my skin just enough to make me shiver. Before the goose bumps had gone away, his lips were around my clit.

Some part of my mind wanted to be frustrated that we were still drawing this out, that we were avoiding something so simple, but I wasn't about to stop him from doing this. I wanted him to fuck me, I wanted to cross this line, but what he was doing felt too damned good to stop.

"That's perfect," I slurred, gently grasping his hair. "Just like that."

He wasn't drawing it out now; every circle and flutter of his tongue was fast, precise, and deliberate. When two fingers slipped inside me and pressed against my G-spot, there was no holding back the orgasm he beckoned into being.

"Just like that... just like that..." I moaned, the words rolling off my tongue over and over again. My back arched and my fingers tightened in his hair, and just before the darkness turned white, my slurred mantra became a single breathless whisper: "*Connor*."

As my vision cleared, so too did my mind. I knew I wanted him, but still had just enough rational thought to be apprehensive, so I swallowed the plea that wanted to come out. Even while he kissed me, his tongue sweet with the taste of me, I hesitated. Begging him to fuck me wasn't so simple now. We'd removed the steps of nightstand, foil, and rolling on. Three steps simpler and one leap more complicated.

Words eluded me. Maybe they did the same to him.

Our bodies knew, though.

His hand slid under my back, hooking over my shoulder to give him leverage *oh God yes, yes, I know what you're doing, Connor*. His hips warmed my inner thighs. *Please, yes, please*. With an unsteady hand, he guided his cock to me.

I bit my lip to suppress a whimper.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" he whispered, almost panting against my lips.

I nodded. For a moment, he paused, just looking at me. I held my breath, sure he was having second thoughts. That he was going to retreat again. I hooked my leg around his and gently pulled him toward me.

He dipped his head and kissed me lightly. Then his breath caught, his body tensed, and his shoulders trembled as they rose above me.

He slid into me slowly, and a shudder ran up his spine. "Oh God," he said. "Fuck, Dani, you feel so—" A tremor reduced his voice to a groan. "You feel so good. So fucking good." He raised himself up on his arms and looked down, watching himself take long, slow strokes in and out of my pussy. When our eyes met again, the lust in his sent electricity rippling straight through me.

I touched his face, drawing him down to kiss me, and the second our lips met, he thrust a little harder. We both gasped, then exhaled together. My body matched the rhythm of his and together we moved faster. God only knew if we were fucking, making love, or somewhere in between, but I just didn't care because he was inside me and he felt so. Damned. Good.

"Oh my God, Dani, I'm gonna come..." Another shudder straightened his spine and his arms trembled

beneath him. His brow furrowed and lips parted, and even through his nearly-there delirium, he seemed to search my eyes for any last second uncertainty.

I hooked my ankles behind his back and rolled my hips to pull him deeper.

Any hesitation he had was gone. He grimaced and thrust even harder, the cords on his neck standing out, and just when I knew he was on the very edge, I swiveled my hips.

"Oh, *fuck!*" His eyes flew open and he gave one last, violent thrust before he groaned and came.

His trembling arms gave out and he sank slowly down to me, sighing against my shoulder. I ran my fingers through his hair, panting in time with him.

When he'd caught his breath, he propped himself up on one elbow and touched my face.

"I've been wanting to feel you this way since the beginning," he whispered, kissing me gently.

"Why didn't you say so?" I smiled up at him.

He smiled back. "Like I said, it seemed like a bit much to throw at you right in the beginning."

"True," I said.

His smile faded a bit and twin lines appeared between his eyebrows. "You are okay with this, though, right?"

"If I wasn't, we wouldn't have."

At that, he relaxed and kissed me again, but a hint of uncertainty nudged its way back into my mind. If I wasn't okay with it, we wouldn't have. Should I have been okay with it, though?

*Stop overanalyzing it*, I ordered myself. But even as we settled in for the night, my mind refused to shut up about it.

My uncertainty outlasted his insomnia, and while he drifted off to sleep beside me, I lay awake. I wasn't sure what to make of all of this. It wasn't the lack of a condom that concerned me, it was the very fact that I *was* so unconcerned about it. We were too at ease for a pair of casual lovers.

The intimacy between us had deepened such that taking this step had been a foregone conclusion. I just wasn't so sure it should have been.

Connor stirred beside me. He exhaled against my shoulder, then was still again. I sighed, trying to follow his lead into sleep.

I was worrying too much. Whatever this meant, there were other factors in play that limited how far this would go. His ex was still in the picture. He was leaving at the end of the summer. It didn't matter how deep this got because there was a finite, pre-determined end to our relationship.

Whatever pieces of me I gave him, I did so with the understanding I'd have them back in a few months.

With that reassurance in mind, I ignored the lingering nervousness in my stomach and fell asleep in Connor's arms.



## ***Twenty***

"Looking good!" Susan called to me from the arena gate.

I reined Dante down from a canter to a walk, the ex-racehorse stumbling once as he made the rough transition. Patting his neck, I steered him toward her. "He's doing better, but he's nowhere near ready to be in front of a judge."

Susan shrugged. "It'll be a good experience for him if nothing else."

"Right," I said. "A nice expensive learning experience."

"Well, if you can talk Gina out of taking him to the show, be my guest."

"Yeah right." I patted Dante's neck again. "Gavin's got her convinced that I can work a miracle with him. I wouldn't be surprised if he told her I'd have this bad boy doing Prix St. George by next summer."

Susan chuckled. "You'll be lucky if you get him past Training Level."

"I'll be lucky if I get him in the trailer and get him to a show at all," I said.

"Good point."

"I told Gina not to expect a championship out of him, but Gavin probably won't be happy if we don't get some obscenely high score."

"Danielle, you could get an Olympic gold medal and Gavin wouldn't be happy."

I laughed. "This is true."

"Guess we'll see how this show goes, won't we?" She pushed herself away from the gate and nodded toward the barn. "I need to get Bridger out before my next lesson gets here. Anyway, he's looking good."

"Good enough for Intermediaire or Grand Prix?"

"Not in this lifetime." She eyed me over her shoulder and walked away.

I turned my attention back to Dante and urged him into a steady trot. I tried to ignore the nervousness in the pit of my stomach. The show was coming up fast and this horse was simply not ready. Though it was Training Level, the lowest and most basic level of dressage, it still required much finer training than I'd had a chance to give him.

Gavin was certain Dante was on the fast track to Prix St. George, but the only fast track in Dante's world was the racetrack he'd retired from. He was less than two years out of his racing career with at least one abusive owner in his past, and that meant I still had a *lot* to undo before he was ready for any competition.

But, Gavin insisted he was ready. Or would be, if I knew what was good for my career.

I sighed and focused on coaxing Dante into a supple, collected trot.

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention and I looked up to see the black Jeep coming down the long driveway. *Ah, Connor, always the perfect remedy for a sour mood.* My stomach fluttered with excitement.

He got out of the Jeep and started toward the barn. Then, just when I was about to call him to get his attention, he saw me and changed direction. I steered Dante to the railing and stopped.

As Connor approached, our eyes met and he hesitated for a second. It was barely noticeable, just a hitch in his step, nearly stumbling but not, then he recovered and continued. His expression changed, though. He looked at Dante, as if intrigued by the horse, but it seemed like he was doing it to avoid looking right at me.

Something was...off.

"Hey, you," I said.

He looked at me and smiled, though it seemed forced.

"Hey."

I leaned down to kiss him. As I did, Dante swung his head around, shoving Connor back with his nose. We both laughed.

"Hey, this is my girl, you bastard," he said, gently nudging the horse away. I pretended Connor's playful claim didn't give me a pleasant shudder, especially given his odd demeanor.

"Okay, let's try this again," I laughed. I leaned down again and he kissed me lightly, backing off after our lips had barely made contact.

*He just doesn't want Dante bumping into him again, I told myself. And I'm at work. He's trying not to make me look unprofessional.* The tightening knot in my gut disagreed.

Connor gestured at Dante. "This isn't one of yours, is it?"

"Good memory." I smiled, hoping he'd do the same.

He did, though the eye contact was fleeting. "Thought he didn't look familiar."

"This one would've been sold a long time ago if he was mine." I paused. "Okay, he's not *that* bad. But our personalities aren't all that compatible."

Connor raised an eyebrow. "Personalities? Compatible?"

"Yes, yes, I know, it sounds ridiculous," I laughed. "Just, trust me on this one."

"You know them better than I do," he said with a shrug. "I'll take your word for it."

"So you don't think I'm crazy?"

He grinned. "Now let's not jump to wild conclusions here."

I gestured menacingly with my whip. "Don't make me—" His smirk cut me off and I rolled my eyes. "Pervert." Deep down, I allowed myself a sense of relief. He still had his flirty sense of humor. Maybe I was imaging this after all. Clearing my throat, I said, "I'm just about done with him. Let me finish up and we can go."

"I'm not in any hurry." His smile was subtle, as it always was, but something in his eyes made me wonder if he was forcing it.

I turned my attention back to Dante. When I pushed him into a trot, I glanced in one of the arena mirrors to

check his form and made the mistake of looking at myself. I quickly looked away, pretending I wasn't as disheveled as the mirror said I was. I wasn't really that sweaty. There wasn't really that much dirt on my well-worn breeches or faded T-shirt. My hair—which was perfectly clean—wasn't falling out of my already messy ponytail, hanging in loose strands around the side of my face.

I looked like hell, but he had to understand that dirty and disheveled were occupational hazards in this business. He knew I worked around horses. He'd seen me at the horse show, though I wasn't nearly as unkempt there. *You're not that shallow, are you, Connor?* I was imagining it. I had to be. He wasn't like that. But why the sudden change in his demeanor when he saw me? I groaned to myself, trying to concentrate on Dante.

I started to turn the horse back toward the center of the arena when something banged inside the barn, followed by a terse voice. Dante stiffened.

"Easy, Dante." I stroked his neck and looked at the gate that connected to the barn. More noise and voices came and Dante fidgeted, dancing in place and snorting, probably trying to decide between running or not.

I walked him in circles, trying to settle him. He was afraid of everyone and everything, but Gavin in particular terrified him. And judging by the echoing voice and stomping footsteps, Gavin was heading toward the arena. I quickly turned Dante toward the opposite end, getting him as far away as I could before my boss appeared.

We were halfway across the arena when something clanged and crashed by the gate. A wheelbarrow with a pitchfork in it, by the sound of it, and Dante grunted with panic, shuffling from side to side as if he couldn't decide which way to go. He finally settled on his usual direction: straight up.

He reared, and I held on with my legs, loosening my grip on the reins so I didn't pull him over on top of me. When he came back down, he backed up a few steps, then started up again. It was only a half-rear this time, and as soon as all four feet were on the ground, I pulled one rein to my right, bringing his head around to my knee so he could neither rear nor run.

"Easy, easy," I murmured. "Easy, Dante." I stroked his neck with my free hand, speaking quietly and calmly in spite of my desire to scream at Gavin.

"You all right?" Connor called to me.

I stroked Dante's mane and said over my shoulder, "I'm fine, don't worry." *As long as Gavin doesn't terrify the damned horse again, I'll be just fine.* Fortunately for everyone, my boss stayed quiet, instead disappearing back into the barn. He must have been putting some tools away, not coming out here to engage me, and for that I was thankful. I didn't want a more panicked Dante than I already had, nor did I want Connor to see the way my boss spoke to me.

I walked the horse in small circles until I was sure he was more or less settled, then urged him into a canter. We made a half lap around the arena, then I brought him back down to a walk and praised him. Barring any more Gavin-induced panics, now our session would end on a positive note.

I took my foot out of the stirrup and swung my leg over, dropping to the ground in a cloud of dust.

"I'm taking him back into the barn," I said to Connor. "Go around to the main door and I'll meet you in the aisle." He nodded and went in the direction I'd indicated. I led Dante from the arena into the barn and cross-tied him in the aisle. A moment later, Connor joined me.

While I unsaddled the horse and groomed him, Connor leaned against the door of an empty stall, but he didn't say much. Neither did I. It was usually so easy for us to fall into conversation. Now something was on his mind and I was afraid to ask just what.

So we didn't talk.

I caught his eye and his quickly darted away. This wasn't like him. Not at all. *Quite the turn-on it must be to see your woman looking like sweaty, unkempt hell.* I gritted my teeth. I'd had a few boyfriends along the way who didn't care for my dirty and disheveled side, but even Matt hadn't been repulsed by it. *So maybe Connor Graham has a flaw after all,* I thought, resisting the urge to roll my eyes.

No, that wasn't like him at all. There had to be something else on his mind. Something bothering him. There

were plenty of other things in his life besides me and my appearance, any one of which could be the cause for his strange mood. Still, I couldn't help but worry. He'd seemed fine until he saw me.

Maybe he'd asked me to lunch because he wanted to end things. I hoped and prayed that wasn't the case. Even though I knew this was a short term arrangement, every time I caught so much as an inkling that it might end sooner than later, I panicked. That alone worried me.

"Hey, stranger!" Susan's voice came out of nowhere and brought me into the present.

"Hey, you." Connor smiled and gave her a quick hug. "They still let you work here?"

She snorted. "Are you kidding? This place would go under without me."

"I'm surprised it hasn't gone under *with* you," he said.

She elbowed him. "Danielle, how do you put up with him?"

I shrugged. "He puts out."

Startled laughter burst out of both of them. My eyes met Connor's, and his humor diminished when his eyes darted away again.

The three of us made small talk while I finished up with Dante, and when I returned from taking him back to his stall, Susan had left.

"Let me put my gear away and we can get out of here." I smiled at Connor, hoping he'd do the same. His lips offered only the ghost of a smile, one corner of his mouth curling upward just slightly, not quite far enough to extend to his eyes.

Resting my saddle against my hip, I picked up my bridle and took them into the tack room. Dull footsteps on concrete told me he was walking with me, but I didn't look over my shoulder. I wished I could read his mind. There must have been something bothering him, something on his mind that quieted his usual friendliness. He was never the type to be incredibly animated or boisterous, but this mood was...odd. He wasn't cold or hostile toward me, but the longer this went on, with something hiding just beneath the surface, the more it unnerved me.

Whatever it was, I'd ask on the way to lunch. In the

tack room, I put my saddle on its rack and hung the bridle on the wall beside it. Dusting my hands off, I turned around.

And halted.

Connor leaned against the doorframe, arms across his chest and the very slightest hint of a grin raising the corner of his mouth. He didn't avoid my eyes but met them full-on. Boldly. Like he'd never even thought to look anywhere but right at me.

And in his eyes, that look.

Goose bumps prickled my skin and electricity radiated from my clit and up my spine, nearly making me shiver. I had to be imagining the way he looked at me. Or else I'd imagined the way he'd been looking at me since the moment he'd arrived.

I smiled and cocked my head. "What?"

The corners of his mouth rose a little higher. "Nothing." But still he didn't take his eyes off me.

I laughed self-consciously, brushing a few loose strands of hair out of my face. "Connor, you're looking at me like that."

He tilted his head slightly, just enough to add mischievousness to his expression. "Looking at you like what?"

"Like that." I swallowed. "Like you're thinking about things that should wait until I look a bit less like hell." I gestured at my sweaty, disheveled self.

"On the contrary." He pushed himself off the doorframe and started toward me. "It's the way you look right now that's doing this to me." A heartbeat later, his lips were against mine and I knew he was telling the truth. I couldn't fathom how or why, but I also couldn't argue with his passionate, breathless kiss.

When he broke the kiss, he just looked at me, breathing hard and moistening his lips. He tucked a few unruly strands of hair behind my ear and his hand kept going, sliding around the back of my neck and pulling me to him again.

His lips brushing mine, he whispered, "If you only knew what you do to me, Dani."

"Looking like this?" I said. "But—"

"The minute I saw you like this," he said, stepping

back and watching his hands run down my sides and over my hips. "Jesus, ever since I got here I've been going out of my mind because I couldn't touch you."

"But I'm—" I shook my head. "I look like—"

"You look like a woman I want to fuck until I can't move."

My breath caught. "Connor..."

"I can't explain it," he said. "I just, I can't. But... my God, Dani..." He trailed off and pulled me into another kiss, pressing his hips against mine. It shouldn't have surprised me that his cock was that hard, but knowing it was and feeling it against me were two different things. I shivered.

He dipped his head and kissed my neck, sliding his hand over my shirt and gently cupping my breast. "I want you so bad right now," he said against my jaw. "If there was no one else around and I could get away with it, I would fuck you right here and now."

He lifted his head and when our eyes met, I understood all the looks he'd given me since he showed up. Or rather, the looks he *hadn't* given me. The lust in his eyes explained it all: he was struggling to stay in control. His distance wasn't coldness or anger, it was restraint.

Restraint that, judging by the look on his face now, was suspended by a very, very thin thread.

I pushed my hips against him, biting my lip when he closed his eyes and groaned. When I reached between us and squeezed him gently, that thread frayed just a little more.

"Dani," he whispered, trailing trembling fingers down the side of my face and neck. "I want you. That's all there is to it. I want you. *Now.*"

I could barely comprehend that I had this kind of power over him, that I could reduce him to single syllables and shaking hands. That I had the same effect on him that he had on me every. Damned. Time.

In fact, I could barely comprehend anything right then except the fact that I didn't just want him.

I *needed* him.

"Wait." I gently pushed him away. He looked at me with panic in his eyes, silently begging me not to put a stop to this.



"Dani—"

I sidestepped him and went to the door. I paused, listening over my thundering heartbeat. Aside from the usual noises of the horses in their stalls, the barn was silent. Empty. We were alone. Just to be on the safe side, I shut the tack room door and latched it.

When I turned around, we stared at each other for a second, letting the stillness set in around us.

The thread snapped.

We came together in a frantic, violent kiss, grasping clothing, hair, anything that might keep the other from pulling away. Our trembling hands found their way to each other's belts and zippers, and in between panting breaths and desperate kisses, we both cursed at our uncooperative clothing. When all the fasteners finally conceded, Connor pushed my breeches over my hips and turned me around. The nearest thing I could find for support was a saddle, so I held onto it while he bent me over, guided his cock to my pussy, and thrust inside me.

He met some resistance, but it didn't slow him down and I didn't protest. The hint of friction only emphasized how desperately we needed each other; he always made sure I was wet and ready for him, but this time, we just couldn't wait.

My arms trembled with the power of my building orgasm, and every time he slammed into me, they threatened to buckle. I lowered myself onto my forearms, resting them across the seat of the saddle, and the leather creaked and groaned as Connor fucked me harder, harder, harder.

He grabbed my ponytail in one hand, gripping it just tight enough that he pulled slightly with every thrust. I closed my eyes and whimpered, giving in to the electricity radiating from my G-spot with every stroke.

"Just like that," I moaned, struggling to stay quiet. "Just... yes... that..."

The saddle squeaked furiously beneath us while Connor fucked me even harder.

"Oh God, you're close, I can feel it," he whispered, his voice shaking like he was on the verge of tears. "You feel so good, so damned good, so... oh... God..." He gasped, faltered,

and when he released a ragged breath shaped like my name, I lost it.

As soon as I surrendered to my spine-melting orgasm, Connor released my hair and held my hips, slamming into me as hard as he could. He kept going through the peak of my orgasm, but with every stroke, his rhythm came apart a little more.

"Oh fuck," he breathed. "Oh fuck, Dani, I can't stop, I can't, I'm..." With one deep, powerful thrust, he was all the way inside me and he shuddered against me, burying his face in my hair to muffle a throaty groan.

Then everything was still and silent, nothing moving except the air rushing in and out of our lungs and the muffled creak of leather beneath us. After a moment, he kissed the side of my neck and slowly pulled out. He stepped back to fix his clothes and I pushed myself up, the saddle issuing one last, loud protest.

"That was fucking amazing." His voice still trembled, as did his hands as he buckled his belt. My hands weren't much steadier.

"You're telling me."

He cupped the sides of my neck in both hands and kissed me gently. "And just think..." Another kiss. "After we go out tonight? We can do it all over again."

## ***Twenty One***

Murphy's Law was in full effect that night. My last lesson of the day arrived late, so I left late. Just late enough, in fact, to hit the worst traffic on the bridges across Lake Washington. By the time I pulled into my apartment parking lot, I was an hour late.

Connor, of course, was there waiting for me. I'd called ahead to let him know, but he still beat me there. When I got out of my car, he stepped around the back of it and greeted me with a long kiss.

"Sorry I'm late," I said.

"You're here, I'm not complaining."

I looked down at my clothes. "I do need to take a shower and change before we go."

"Fine by me," he said with a smile. "We have plenty of time." He followed me across the parking lot and into my apartment building.

"I won't be long," I said over my shoulder. "But I'd like to look somewhat presentable."

He chuckled. "I don't know, I rather like the way you look right now."

"I know you do, you dirty bastard," I laughed.

"Yeah, I guess I gave myself away earlier, didn't I?"

When I glanced back at him, he gave me that devilish grin and pulled his hand away, pretending he hadn't been reaching up to cop a feel.

I gave him a playful glare. "You're incorrigible."

"It's your fault," he said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, is it now?" I eyed him, trying not to laugh.

"Well, you're the one who looked like you needed to be bent over a saddle and given a good hard fuck."

He caught me off guard and I tripped on the next step. He put a hand on my hip to steady me while I regained my footing, but he made no effort to pull it away once I had my feet under me again.

Continuing up the stairs, he slid his hand down over my rear and squeezed gently, then murmured in my ear, "Having trouble walking, are we?"

"Maybe," I said. "And if I am, it's your fault."

He kissed my cheek. "Guilty as charged." We stopped long enough for another kiss, one I knew he wanted to draw out, but I gently pulled away and tugged his arm.

"We'll have time for that later," I said.

"We have time for it now."

"Not if we're going to go out." I smiled at him, laughing when he tried to look put out.

"You're going to tease me all night now, aren't you?" he asked, putting his hands on my hips and nuzzling my neck.

I fumbled with my house key. "I think you're the one teasing me, Mr. Graham."

"Am not," he murmured. "Because all you have to do is say the word, and I'll—"

"Come on, you." I rolled my eyes and half-dragged him into the house.

He laughed and shut the door behind us. "Can I at least have a proper kiss, now that we're away from prying eyes?"

"If I kiss you like that, we'll never get out of here."

He grinned and shrugged, taking a step toward me.

I put my hands on his chest. "We'll be here all night, Connor." I tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. "Let me get a shower."

"Maybe I should join you," he said. "You know, make sure you don't miss a spot."

"Uh-huh," I said. "I'm sure that's exactly what you have in mind."

He put his hands up. "I just want to help you get clean."

"Please, Connor," I laughed. "If you get in the shower

with me, I'll end up even dirtier than I am now."

"So?"

I rolled my eyes. "Stay here. I'll just be a few minutes."

I should have known we wouldn't get far.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in nothing but a towel, he was there, resting his hip against my bed. And he had that look again.

"Connor," I said, trying not to smile when he started toward me. "Wait until we get home."

"We are home." He put his hands on my hips.

"I know, but—"

He kissed me, sliding his tongue past my lips and melting my defenses. When he bent to kiss my neck, I put my hands on his chest to try to push him away, but my fingers sided with him and held onto his shirt.

"We've got a little bit of time." He was freshly shaved, but his jaw was just coarse enough to make me shiver.

"I should get dressed," I said.

"That's the last thing you should do," he murmured.

"But we'll never make it to the restaurant."

He tugged at the towel, letting it slide to the floor and pool at my feet. Cupping my breast, he said, "We'll order pizza."

"But we—"

His thumb circled my nipple and all I could do was close my eyes and bite my lip.

"We could go out," he said, kissing his way down my neck. "Go have a leisurely, quiet dinner down by the water." He nipped my shoulder gently. "Maybe walk along the waterfront." He flicked his tongue across the hollow of my throat. "Or, we could stay here..." His hands ran down my back and he pulled me closer to him. "...and I could spend a leisurely evening making you come."

When his tongue parted my lips, protesting any further was out of the question. My nipples tingled when his shirt brushed across them, and coarse denim against my hips gave me goose bumps.

"I know what you want to do," he whispered. The hand on the small of my back held me to him, pressing his hips against me so I could feel how hard he was. "I've been

thinking about this afternoon all day long, and I hope you have too." A shudder ran up my spine and a soft breath of laughter warmed the side of my neck. "Just say the word."

"There's just one problem," I said. He raised an eyebrow. Grinning, I tugged at his shirt. "You have entirely too many clothes on."

He looked down. "So I do."

~ \* ~

Lying on our sides, he played with my hair while I draped my arm over his waist. For a while, we didn't speak, but then I couldn't help but laugh when a thought crossed my mind.

"What?" he asked.

Snickering softly, I said, "You know, we still have yet to make it to that restaurant."

He smiled. "You're right, we haven't."

"Seems like every time we try to go there, we end up in bed."

The smile turned to his mouthwatering devilish grin. "Maybe I should send them a thank-you card, then."

"I wouldn't put it past you," I said.

"So do you want to go there tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Do you really want to go, or should we just cut right to the chase and meet here?"

He leaned forward and kissed me gently. "Let's just meet here." Pushing himself up on one arm, he kissed my neck. "Assuming we even make it out of this bed tonight and we're not still here tomorrow night."

"I don't know what's gotten into you today," I said. "But I'm not going to object to it."

He settled back onto his side. "What got into me," he said, running his fingers through my hair. "Is seeing you looking the way you did today."

I furrowed my brow. "The way I looked? Connor, I was sweaty and dirty. I looked like hell."

"I know. That's what was hot."

"What? How is that sexy?"

"Babe, look at it from my perspective," he said. "I show up and see you disheveled and sweaty. What do you think is the first thing that crosses my mind?"

I shrugged. "A shower?"

"Maybe with you pinned against the wall with my cock inside you."

I shivered. There was something deliciously sexy about Connor being so brazenly filthy.

He smiled. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I just can't imagine being turned on by that," I said.

"Let's put it this way," he said. "When I think back to the night we met, what do you think I think of?"

"Probably all the things we did in my bed."

"Exactly. And by the time I was done with you, you were sweaty and disheveled, weren't you?"

"Just like I always am when you—" I paused.

"See what I mean?" He trailed his finger down my arm. "So when I saw you today, the first thing that crossed my mind was how much you looked like you'd just been fucked." He kissed me gently. "And that turned me on so much I couldn't see straight."

I laughed and released a breath. "What's funny is, the whole time you were there with me, I thought you were upset or something was bothering you."

"No, no, no," he said. "The only thing bothering me was an aching hard-on and no way to take care of it."

"So I found out."

It was his turn to shiver. "And Jesus Christ, that was hot."

"Yes, it was. So if I want to turn you on, I just need to get sweaty and mess up my hair?"

"As if you have ever had any difficulty turning me on, Dani."

"You know what I mean."

He put his hand over mine. "There are plenty of ways to turn me on besides that."

"Do tell," I said. "What else turns you on, Mr. Graham?"

"Besides you?"

I rolled my eyes, certain my cheeks were red. "Yes, besides me."

"Honestly, all you have to do is touch me," he said. "The right touch can drive me absolutely out of my mind."

"Pity I can't do that in public."

"Of course you can," he said. "There are plenty of places you can touch me without anyone else even batting an eye."

"Such as?"

"Anywhere, really. All depends on how you do it. Touch is one of the sexiest things in the world," he said. "Everyone gets so hung up on touching erogenous zones, they forget that anywhere can be erogenous if it's touched just right."

"Seriously?"

"Sure. I mean..." He trailed off, and at first I thought he was searching for the words. Then, goose bumps suddenly prickled my arm. He gave me a knowing grin, and when I looked down, I realized he'd trailed his thumb along the inside of my wrist, a place I'd never thought of as being particularly sensitive.

"I'll bet," he said with a grin. "If you gave me the chance, I could show you just how sexy a simple touch can be."

"I think you already have." I shivered, and the goose bumps lingered.

"I mean I think I could make you come absolutely unglued without ever touching your pussy."

"I'm not stopping you," I said.

"Just wait." He kissed me gently. "One of these nights."

"Why not tonight?"

"Isn't the same when you've already come a few times," he said. "I'd rather start when you aren't turned on already."

"Like that could happen when I'm around you."

He laughed. "Well, then I'll just have to move in quickly, won't I?"

"A sneak attack?" I grinned.

"When you least expect it," he said.

"I'll just have to keep my guard up, then."

"We'll see about that."

"Bring it on." We both laughed.

After a moment, the humor faded from his expression, and the creases between his eyebrows suggested deep thought. Deep thought I doubted had anything to do with the



two fingers playing with a loose strand of my hair, even though his eyes were focused on them.

"You're awfully quiet all of a sudden," I said.

"Sorry," he said, but the smile that flickered across his lips seemed forced. When our eyes met, there was an intensity in his that surprised me in the wake of such playfulness.

"You okay?"

He nodded. "Just thinking." His cheeks colored a little and he watched his fingers again. "And this is going to sound incredibly stupid, but..." Scratching the back of his neck, he took a breath. "But this has never happened with any other woman before."

"What? Sex?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that's it. I was a virgin up until the night we met."

"You're a fast learner then."

"Brat." He paused to kiss me lightly. Though the seriousness returned to his voice and face, he held my gaze this time. "What I meant was—this—I don't know what to call it, it's..." He made a frustrated gesture and sighed. "I mean, it's not just today, or tonight, but whenever I'm around you, I have to have you. Always. It's like, no matter how much I have you, it's never enough."

I wetted my lips, blood pounding in my ears. How could he possibly be thinking the same thing I was? Though I hadn't found the words, and even someone as eloquent as he had difficulty, the meaning came across loud and clear.

Apparently taking my lack of an answer as confusion, Connor took a breath and went on. "Honestly, Dani," he whispered. "I've never met someone I was so desperate to have. It's like, there are times I just completely lose control around you. I have to have you right now, I can't wait."

"Like tonight," I said.

"And this afternoon, yes," he said, his voice soft. "I thought it was because we only had limited time. You know, like I wanted to have you as much as possible before I leave." He smoothed my hair and looked into my eyes. "The thing is, all day long, and all evening, this whole time we've been talking, until now I hadn't even thought about the fact that I'm leaving." He touched my face and took a breath. "To

be honest, I can't help but think that if I wasn't leaving, I'd still need you just the same." He paused, offering a look that was a mix of shyness and uncertainty. "Am I making any sense at all?"

*More than you know.* I swallowed. "Actually, yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

"Thank God," he said with a huff of laughter. "Then it isn't as crazy as it sounded in my head."

"Apparently not," I said quietly. My heart thudded in my chest. It didn't sound crazy at all, but it did scare me. Pushing those fears aside, I pulled him a little closer and kissed him. When I broke the kiss, there was something in his eyes again. Something else.

"Thinking again?"

He smiled. "I'm always thinking."

"So what are you thinking about now?"

His eyes darted away for a second, and when he looked at me, there was something like shyness and apprehension in his eyes. "I'm flying down to San Francisco soon. That area, anyway. To look for an apartment, talk to some professors."

My heart sank. Another reminder that his time here was short. I swallowed.

"Would—" He paused, as if searching my eyes for something. "Do you want to go with me?"

I blinked. "Are you serious?"

He shrugged. "I'll be down there for a week, and I was planning to check out some of the touristy stuff while I'm there. I just, you know, I thought it would be fun if you came with me."

"When are you going?"

"Second week of July."

"There's no way I can get a week off from work this time of year," I said.

"What about the weekend?" he said. "I have to take care of a few things during the week anyway, mostly down in Palo Alto, but maybe if you came down Friday night and left with me Monday morning?"

I chewed my lip, running through the schedule of shows, appointments, lessons, and clinics over the next few weeks. *That lesson can probably be rescheduled. They don't*

*need me to be there for Stetson's appointment. Susan can handle Xena and Orion for a couple of days.*

Connor squeezed my hand gently. "If you don't, it's okay, I—"

"No, no, I think it would be fun," I said. "I need to check with my boss about a few things, but, yeah, if you want me to come with you..."

"I definitely do." He smiled.

"You sure you wouldn't get tired of me?"

He laughed, but the fingertips trailing down the side of my face were tender when he whispered, "I don't think that's possible, Dani."

Pretending that didn't scare the hell out of me, I offered him a playful smile. "So does that mean you haven't gotten enough of me tonight?"

He put his arms around me and, kissing me deeply, rolled me onto my back. "Not even close."

## ***Twenty Two***

Gritting my teeth, I led Dante up and down the path beside one of the front pastures, as much to calm the horse as myself. About fifty feet away, the ancient three-horse slant-load trailer stood empty, its door yawning open while Susan, Gina, and Gavin milled around, waiting to try loading Dante again.

Twice we'd tried to get the skittish gelding into the terrifying metal box, and twice our efforts disintegrated into a riled up horse, three frustrated women, and one shouting, cursing man. Gavin insisted that we needed to try again immediately. After all, it was a long trip to Eastern Washington for the show—the show Dante was nowhere *near* ready for—and they needed to get on the road sooner than later. Once he was in the trailer, Dante would be fine, but he was about as easy to unload as he was to load. None of us relished the idea of getting him out of the trailer in the dark.

"God damn it, Dani, we don't have all day," Gavin barked.

I took a deep breath, patting Dante's neck. Over my shoulder, I called out, "He's still too fired up." The horse was fairly calm by this point. The same could not be said for me.

Voices muttered in the distance, but were just far enough out of earshot to obscure the words. Then gravel crunched and when I turned, Susan was approaching. I stopped under the guise of letting Dante grab a few bites of grass while I let her catch up.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked.

"Besides run Gavin over a few times with the trailer?" I said through my teeth.

She allowed herself a huff of laughter, then glanced over her shoulder. Folding her arms across her chest, she nodded at Dante. "We have to get him in sooner or later."

"Short of sedating him, I don't know what else to do. And if he wasn't going to a show, I'd have done that by now." I paused, watching Dante graze. "Though if we can get rid of Gavin for a few minutes, that might help."

"Hmm." Susan shifted her weight, chewing her lip. "I think I know how I can get him out of here." She nodded toward Dante again. "Think you can get him in the trailer by yourself?"

"Yeah. He was getting braver before that asshole scared him again. Maybe if there's no one around to make him nervous, he'll load." I tugged Dante's lead rope to bring his head up so I could lead him back to the trailer. "He's gone in without too much trouble when Gavin isn't around."

"Let's do it, then."

Together, we walked back, Dante plodding calmly between us as if nothing had traumatized him earlier. I led him to the trailer and let him investigate it. Just as I'd hoped, he was quieter now, sniffing around the edges and finding a few stray hay crumbs. As the trailer became a place to find little morsels of food instead of a big scary box, he visibly relaxed. All I needed was a few more minutes of this, and getting him into the trailer without a fight might be possible.

Susan and I exchanged nods.

"Gavin, can I borrow you in the barn?" she asked.

"Not right now, Susan," he snapped. "We need to get this fucking horse loaded."

"I can handle him." I stroked Dante's neck. "He's calming down now. I'll be fine."

"I just need a hand with one of the yearlings," Susan said.

Gavin looked at me, then at her. Irritation thinned his lips into a bleached line. Cursing under his breath, he threw the lead rope in his hand and started toward the barn. The metal clip on the lead rope clanged against the trailer and Dante flew backwards, snorting and half-rearing.

"Easy, Dante." I tugged his rope to get his attention. "It's okay, it's okay." It took every bit of effort I had to keep my voice gentle and even, because I wanted to strangle my damned boss just then. Twenty minutes of walking to quiet the horse, and in mere seconds, Gavin sent me right back to square one.

After a few more minutes of soothing pats on the neck and gentle words, Dante was calm and willing to approach it again. He took one step, then another, snorting at the echo of his own steps inside the trailer. Three times he backed all the way out, but the fourth time, he finally got in.

I coaxed him to the front of the trailer, showing him to the treasure trove of hay that awaited him. He wasn't stupid; he stood back as far as he could so he could reach the hay without getting close enough for me to secure him. Minute by minute, though, he forgot his apprehension and crept closer.

Stomping footsteps on the gravel made my breath catch. Gavin. *Shit*.

Dante tensed. He stopped chewing and the whites of his eyes showed.

"Easy, buddy," I whispered. "It's okay. Look, there's food." I rustled the hay to draw his attention back to it, and fortunately, it worked. He grabbed another mouthful and happily chomped away.

"I don't know why the hell I pay you two if you can't do simple bullshit things like that," Gavin snapped outside. Dante tensed again, but I tried to keep him calm. I also urged him forward. He still needed to be a little closer before I could secure him, and I didn't like the idea of being in the trailer with an unpredictable horse while Gavin was close by. Especially since this was one of the older model trailers that lacked an escape door. My only way out was also Dante's only way out.

I pushed the hay just beyond Dante's reach, and he followed. He was right where I needed him to be, so I looped his lead rope through the metal ring, being careful not to make any sudden movements. The voices outside were terse, and it was escalating. My heart pounded, but I kept myself calm to keep Dante from picking up on my nervousness.

*Don't scare him, Gavin, please don't scare him. Not now.*

While I secured the lead rope, Gavin's furious voice sent a chill down my spine.

"Oh now what the fuck is this? God *damn* it!"

Dante stiffened, the whites of his eyes showing again.

I reached for him, ready to calm him with a gentle touch.

Something solid—Metal? Plastic?—hit the side of the trailer and my heart had time for one panicked beat before the world inside the trailer erupted into chaos. Panicked grunts and snorts. A body much larger than my own flailing back and forth in a desperate attempt to escape. Shouts from outside added to the confusion, but were mostly lost beneath the thunder of scrambling hooves. I couldn't get past him, nor did I bother trying to calm him; it was too late for that. Instead I reached for the quick-release on his lead rope, trying to grab it even while he threw himself from side to side. If I got him loose, he could back out of the trailer. Dangerous, but less so than trapping both of us in here like this.

In his blind panic, Dante stumbled, going down to one knee before throwing himself upright, but he lost his balance again and slammed into me, pinning me against the wall. For a split second, he was off me, only to crash into me again with even more force. My vision clouded and everything became a blur of pain and motion.

The quick-release must have finally given, because I was suddenly alone. I sank to my knees, only vaguely aware of my kneecaps cracking against the hard rubber mats. I fell forward and caught myself on one arm, holding the other across my chest. There was pain somewhere, so distant it registered much like a memory of past pain. Or a promise of future pain once this more immediate and more terrifying concern passed:

*I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.*

My lungs became leaden slabs that could neither inhale nor exhale. I tried to cough. Again. Nothing.

*Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Can't breathe.*

Movement around me. Voices. Something touching me. Panic inside. Panic outside. Panic.

*Can't. Breathe.*

At last, a cough broke through and the paralysis snapped. I gulped in a few deep breaths, each more painful than the last as my ribs protested, but I could breathe. Mentally, I did my usual post-fall body part inventory: Fingers moved. Toes moved. Head turned. Nothing numb. No head injury. No neck injury.

But pain. Dear sweet Jesus, *pain*.

Susan's voice broke through the red haze. "Dani, talk to me." She squeezed my shoulders and I wondered how long she'd been holding them. "Dani?"

"I'm okay." I coughed, tears blurring my vision and fire searing every inch of my ribcage.

"Gavin, call the paramedics," Susan said.

"Is she all right?" he asked, his voice adding a layer of teeth-grinding rage to the pain.

"Yes, she's just fine, that's why she needs a fucking ambulance," Susan snapped. A moment later, she said to me, "Can you sit up?"

With her hands steadying me, I sat back, still protectively holding my chest with one arm. She eased me back against the side of the trailer, the support offering both relief and fresh pain when metal nudged bruises. I closed my eyes and rested my head against the wall, breathing as deeply as the pain would allow.

"Where's Dante?" My voice sounded like it came from somewhere else.

"Gina's got him," she said. "She took him back to the barn."

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine," she said. "Scraped his leg a little on the way out, but he's fine. You don't need to worry about him, though. Now look at me."

I opened my eyes. She ran through a few drills to make sure I didn't have a head injury or nerve damage: Making my eyes track her finger, having me squeeze her hands, wiggling my toes. Though I had already done the same and was certain my head and neck were fine, I couldn't deny the sense of relief every time a limb or digit did what it was supposed to do.

"Can you take a deep breath?" she asked.



"I can," I said. "But I really don't want to."

"How bad is the pain?"

"Bad."

"How bad?"

I took a semi-deep breath and closed my eyes against the resulting fire. "Bad enough I'd fuck Gavin if it made it stop hurting."

Susan snorted with laughter. "That bad?"

"That bad."

"Yeah, I think you need to go to the hospital," she said, only half-joking. "You might have some busted ribs."

"Just what I need."

Susan let out a sharp huff of breath. "I'm going to have a serious talk with Leslie tonight. Gavin's lucky he didn't get you killed."

"No shit," I said. "There's no way I'm loading another horse with him around. And I swear to God, Dante panics just hearing that man's voice."

"I don't blame him," she muttered. "Shit, we're never going to get that horse to load calmly again."

"We will, it'll just take some time and patience." I glared in the direction Gavin had gone earlier. "As long as someone isn't within earshot."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Susan said. "But I'll talk to Leslie. This is getting ridiculous."

I shifted slightly and winced. "It's gone well past ridiculous."

About ten minutes later, a diesel engine rumbled in the distance, drawing closer, following the familiar curve of the farm's driveway.

"That would be your limousine," Susan said. "I'll be right back. Don't move."

"Not moving."

She got up and stepped out of the trailer. Gravel crunched under tires, then stopped. The diesel engine idled while doors slammed and unfamiliar voices asked questions, which Susan answered. A moment later, two EMTs stepped into the trailer.

They asked questions about the incident, quizzed me to make sure I had no problems with short or long-term memory, poked and prodded, and ran me through the same

drills Susan had already done. Several times they offered me oxygen, but I could breathe well enough. I had plenty of discomfort without a plastic tube blasting cold air up my nose.

They recommended a cervical collar and backboard as a precaution, but I refused that too. My neck was fine, there was no sign of spinal trauma, and immobility would only give my muscles a chance to seize up, which would mean more pain later. For the same reason, I refused the stretcher, insisting I could—and needed to—walk. At least that would reassure me I wasn't badly hurt. One thing I'd learned from countless spills off horses: if I could walk, I was probably okay.

"Can you stand?" one of the medics asked.

"Probably."

He put a hand under my elbow and Susan did the same on the other side. With their help, I stood, wincing as every movement made my back and ribs hurt that much more. I took a few tentative steps, pausing when the pain made me dizzy. I doubted I was seriously hurt, but it definitely wasn't comfortable.

Stepping down from the trailer was absolute agony. Without the presence of a ramp, I had to take the step all at once but as slowly as humanly possible, which required more bending and twisting than my body wanted to accommodate at the moment. When both feet were on the ground, I clung to the side of the trailer and the medic's arm until the fire receded. Gritting my teeth and taking slow, deep breaths, I started the long trek to the ambulance, which was about fifteen feet away.

I caught a glimpse of Gavin, standing off to the side with his arms across his chest and a scowl on his face. He didn't speak. He probably didn't dare.

Entering the ambulance required the opposite of exiting the trailer: a step up.

"Can you make it okay?" the medic asked, adjusting his grip on my arm when a wave of dizziness made me falter.

I nodded, and I was right. I made it. By the time I did, though, the pain was almost unbearable and I finally gave in to the suggestion of a stretcher. At least that made the

ambulance ride marginally less painful.

In the emergency room, there was no getting comfortable on the rock hard bed, but it beat the hell out of the X-ray table. Fortunately, I only had to spend a few minutes on the latter. And, since the ER wasn't terribly crowded, I didn't have to spend an eternity on the former either. Plus I had Susan to keep me company, which didn't do much for the pain, but it passed the time.

About three hours after I arrived, after I'd been poked, prodded, and X-rayed, the doctor finally came in with my prognosis.

"The good news is nothing's broken. The bad news is, it's still going to hurt for a few days." A grin played at the corner of his mouth, suggesting he expected me to find some humor in that, but I knew what was in store for me for the next week or so and didn't find it especially funny.

"I figured it would," I said dryly.

"I'm going to recommend at least a week off from your job," he said. "After that, it's at your discretion, but don't push yourself or you're going to be in a hell of a lot more pain."

I tried not to roll my eyes while he prattled on about rest, relaxation, and all of the common sense protocols I'd heard every time a horse put me in the emergency room. Ice not heat. Don't lift more than twenty pounds. Call if this or that symptom arises. Blah, blah, blah.

"I'm also going to write a prescription for Vicodin," he said. "That should help for the next few days."

"Thanks," I said.

"I'll be back with your discharge paperwork and you can be on your way," he said.

After I was discharged, I shuffled out to the parking lot with Susan and gingerly sank into the passenger seat of her car.

"Do you want me to stay with you tonight?" She started the car. "In case you're all doped up or need to go back to the ER?"

"Aren't you heading to Wenatchee?"

She shook her head, then looked over her shoulder while she backed out of the parking space. "Gina scratched Dante from the show. She wants to wait a few days before

we try putting him in a trailer again. Besides, you're out of commission now and I'm sure as hell not showing him."

I sighed and rubbed my forehead with two fingers. "Well, give me a week or so to recover and we can work on him." I sighed again. "Christ, this is going to set me back for days with all the other horses."

"Don't worry about it. I'll make sure they're all worked. You just worry about you." Then she laughed softly. "Poor Connor, he's—"

"Oh shit!" I said. "I completely forgot. I'm supposed to get together with him tonight, and—" I looked at the clock on the dash. "Oh Jesus, I'm supposed to meet him in half an hour."

Susan snickered. "You might want to cancel. I don't think the good doctor recommends any bedroom rodeo activities in your fragile state."

"Shut up." I laughed and pulled my phone out of my purse. "That's the last thing I'm doing with anyone anytime soon."

"You said earlier you'd fuck Gavin—"

"Yeah, *if* it would make the pain go away, and until I see a double-blind study showing that sex with Gavin cures pain from bruised ribs, I'm not touching him." I brought Connor's number up. "You don't mind if I call him, do you?"

"Of course not, go ahead."

"Thanks." I sent the call and waited for it to connect.

"Hey babe," Connor said. Even in my pain-fogged state, his voice gave me pleasant chills.

"Hey," I said. "Listen, I have to cancel tonight. I, um—" "Why did I suddenly feel like a wimp for bowing out over an injury? It wasn't like I'd broken a nail or had 'a headache.' Getting slammed into a wall by a three quarter ton animal was a reasonable excuse in anyone's book."

"Dani?"

I cleared my throat, wincing. "One of the horses knocked me around in a trailer, so—"

"Jesus Christ, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Nothing's broken, just bruised my ribs pretty good. I'll just be sore for a few days."

"Ouch. Are you okay getting home? Do you need a lift?"

"Susan's taking me home. My car's still at the barn but..." I paused. "Anyway, I'll figure it out. Don't worry about it."

"Well, do you at least want some company tonight?"

"You don't mind? I don't imagine I'll be great company."

He chuckled. "It's not like I have any plans, seeing as my date so inconsiderately bailed on me."

I laughed. "That bitch."

"I know," he said with mock disgust. "Anyway, I'm serious. If you want some company, it's your call. I'd rather spend time with you than not."

I smiled. "I'll leave the door unlocked. Just let yourself in."

"Will do. See you soon."

## ***Twenty Three***

I was in the kitchen when the front door opened.

"Dani?" he called down the hall.

"In here," I said. A second later, he appeared in the doorway.

"Hey you." He came toward me, presumably to give his customary greeting kiss, then stopped, putting his hands up. "I'm sure you heard this a million times at the ER, but where does it hurt?"

I grimaced. "Everywhere."

His expression mirrored mine. "You sure you're okay?"

"You could kiss me and see if it makes it better."

He smiled, but hesitated. His eyes flicked to his hands, then back to me.

I took his wrists and laid his hands on the sides of my neck. Carefully avoiding touching me except with his hands and his lips, he bent and kissed me so tenderly I almost forgot how much my body hurt.

When he broke the kiss, he gently lifted his hands off me. "So what happened, anyway?"

"Remember that skittish horse I was on the day you came to see me at the barn?"

"Yeah, the one that freaked out on you?"

I nodded. "The very one. I was putting him in the trailer, boss scared the crap out of him, horse freaked, and ended up pinning me against the side of the trailer while he was panicking. Twice."

Connor grimaced. "Jesus."

"I was lucky," I said. "It could have been much, much worse, especially with a horse his size."

"No kidding. And nothing's broken or anything? They're sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." I put my hands on his waist. "Just a lot of bumps and bruises."

He ran his fingers through my hair. It was a habit of his anyway, but probably also the only thing he could think to do that didn't stand much of a chance of hurting me. "So I guess a little rough and tumble BDSM action is out of the question tonight?" He tried to look put out.

"I'll make it up to you, I promise." I laughed, then winced.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. My ribs don't approve of laughing right now."

"And being up and around on your feet probably isn't helping either," he said. "Wouldn't you be more comfortable sitting or lying down?"

"Probably." I started toward the couch, then stopped. "Okay, I swear to God this isn't a come-on, but I think the bed might be a bit more comfortable."

"You're the one in pain." He made an "after you" gesture down the hall.

He followed me into the bedroom and kept a gentle hand on my arm while I eased myself onto the bed. Lying back, I bit my lip while my ribs protested every motion. Too late, I realized I'd only grabbed two pillows, even though I needed a third to truly be comfortable.

"Could you hand me that pillow?" I gestured toward the one that was just out of reach, flinching when that simple motion ignited fresh pain.

He picked it up. "Where do you want it?"

"Behind my shoulders. I can get it."

"I've got it," he said. "Can you sit up a little?"

I sat up, my eyes stinging when pain tore down my back and sides, but he quickly put the pillow where I needed it. Then, with a gentle hand on my shoulder, he guided me back against it.

"I'm going to feel like hell tomorrow," I muttered, exhaling as the pain receded to a somewhat more bearable level.

Connor moved slowly beside me to keep from jarring me or the bed while he lay on his side. "I hope they gave you something for it."

"Vicodin," I said.

"Have you taken it?"

"Nah. It hurts, but I'll deal with it."

He raised an eyebrow. "There's no shame in taking them, you know."

"I don't need it," I said. "All it does is fuck up my head and give me crazy dreams."

He cringed. "Yeah, painkillers definitely do that, don't they?"

"I take it you've had to use them a few times?"

"Trust me, I've had my share of bumps and bruises over the years."

"So is this where we compare battle scars?"

"Well, war stories," he said. "Most of mine didn't leave scars."

"Neither did mine." I shifted slightly, just enough to remind me how much this hurt. As if I'd forgotten. "And even if they did, I'm not moving to show you any."

He laughed. "I wouldn't expect you to. So, ever broken anything?"

"Arm and collarbone," I said.

His eyebrows jumped. "At the same time?"

"Nope. Fractured my arm showing off on a horse when I was twelve, broke my collarbone after a colt dumped me about three years ago."

"Ouch."

"You're telling me. Same question."

Moving slowly and carefully, he turned onto his side, propping his head up on one arm. He held up his other hand. "I have three pins in this wrist after a car accident when I was twenty. Made the mistake of putting my hand out to catch myself, and hit the dashboard *just* right."

I cringed. "Bet that ruined your day."

"Wasn't as bad as when I broke my jaw."

"Are you serious? How did you manage that?"

"Riding my bike when I was a kid," he said. "Did a face plant on some pavement and tried to use my chin for landing gear."



I laughed, which instantly sent more pain searing up my sides. "Oh, ow."

"Sorry." He cringed apologetically. "I won't make you laugh anymore, I promise."

"That'll be the day." I winked at him and he smiled back. "Damn it, now that I'm comfortable, I need something to drink. Do you want anything?" I started to sit up, but he caught my shoulder with just enough firmness to stop me.

"Yes, I want you to stay here," he said. "I'll go get it. What do you want?"

"It's not a big deal," I said. "I need to move around a bit."

"Dani, you're in pain. You just got off your feet, and you'd probably be wise to stay that way for a while. Now tell me what you want."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he gave me a look that silenced me.

"Don't argue with me. Drink?"

Rolling my eyes and trying to look petulant, I said, "There's Pepsi in the fridge."

He got up. "Glass or can?"

"Can, please."

"On it," he said over his shoulder before he disappeared down the hall. A muffled pop announced that the refrigerator door had opened. Soda cans shuffled around, then the door closed again. A moment later, Connor reappeared with two Pepsi cans in his hands. He handed me one.

"You're a lifesaver," I said.

"Just making sure you don't overdo it." He gave me a playful attempt at a serious look, then popped the tab on his own drink. "And if you keep trying to get up and move around, I'm going to have to stay here and make you stay in bed."

I almost choked on my soda, my eyes watering when I coughed twice. *Jesus Christ, chest injuries suck.* "Well, if it means having you here, forcing me to stay in bed, I could think of worse things."

He laughed. Setting the can on the nightstand, he sat on the side of the bed, resting his weight on one arm and gently putting his other hand on my leg. "A shot of caffeine

this late probably isn't going to help you sleep."

I shrugged as much as my sore muscles would allow. "I doubt I'll be sleeping anyway."

"Well, since the pain pills won't help you sleep, I could try to serenade you with all the reams of sixteenth century romantic poetry in my head. That ought to lull you into a coma."

"What? Like *Romeo and Juliet*?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Please. There's nothing romantic about that play."

"Nothing romantic about *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"Well," he said with a shrug. "I guess it depends on your definition of romantic. I don't find it particularly romantic when a clingy twerp gets dumped by one girl, then immediately grabs onto the next girl and falls for her so hard he's willing to off himself rather than face life without her."

"Point taken," I said.

"Though I have to admit, some of the sexual innuendo in that play, along with Shakespeare's other work, is pretty good."

I cocked my head. In my mind, I brushed the dust off the countless lines I'd memorized in high school and college. They'd been drilled into my head time and time again, and were all still in there somewhere. Slowly, they came back, but the double entendres eluded me.

"Sexual innuendo?" I said. "Like what?"

He shifted onto his stomach and pushed himself up on his forearms. "You know the line when Juliet says, '*Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars*'?"

I nodded.

"Well, are you familiar with the phrase, *la petite mort*?" The last three words were spoken in a flawless French accent, his lips and tongue sliding around the syllables just like they did—

I cleared my throat. "I've heard it, yes."

"So you probably know it refers to an orgasm, then," he said. "Do you know the literal translation?"

"A little death,' if I remember correctly."

He nodded. "Exactly. Now, as for that quote from *Romeo and Juliet*, I'm sure there are those who would argue

against it, but if I'm not mistaken..." He slowly wetted his lips as they curled into a grin. "...that dirty minx wants Romeo to make her come so hard she sees stars."

I recited the line in my mind, and only the fear of more pain kept me from shivering. "My God, where were you when I was taking Shakespearean Literature?" I laughed.

He chuckled. "You know, if they taught more about that, I'll bet they could get more students to take Shakespearean Lit."

"I certainly would have stayed awake for more of it."

"You and most—" A shrill ringtone interrupted him. Muttering under his breath, he pulled his phone off his belt and pressed a key to ignore the call. Then he pressed a couple more keys and clipped it back to his belt.

"There. Silent."

"Ex?"

He nodded.

"She just doesn't leave you alone, does she?" I said with as much of a laugh as my sore ribs would allow. As much as her calls annoyed him, they still offered me a sense of relief. Their unfinished business was my safety net.

"No, she doesn't quit." He rolled his eyes. "I'm half-tempted to block her number and quit answering, but..." He gave an apologetic half-shrug. "I don't know, I guess I feel like it would be cruel to give her the cold shoulder. Maybe it's ridiculous, I just still feel bad for hurting her."

I raised an eyebrow. "Hurting her?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "She didn't take it well when I left."

My stomach flipped. "But, I thought," I paused. "I thought she left you."

He cocked his head. "Where did—" Enlightenment came out in the form of a slow nod. "Susan. Right. She and Olivia are friends, too. Most of our friends are mutual friends, so..." He trailed off, exhaling heavily.

"So...?"

He took a deep breath. "Olivia's a proud woman. It's one of the things I loved about her, honestly. When I left, I don't know, I guess she didn't want people to know I'd called it off, so..." He clicked his tongue and shook his head.

"She told everyone she left you?"

"Yeah. Everyone. I figured it out when my phone

started ringing off the hook from people wanting to know how I was doing, if I was all right, that sort of thing."

"And you didn't tell them the truth?"

He shrugged. "If it was that important to her that people thought she made the call, then..." Another shrug. "All I wanted was for it to be over. I couldn't care less how people think it ended, so why create conflict where there isn't any?"

"Interesting way to look at it." I pretended that his revelation didn't twist my gut into knots that were more uncomfortable than the pain Dante had caused.

"So she keeps calling because apparently she thinks that if she asks enough times, I'll take her back." He laughed softly. "There's that definition of insanity again."

I laughed, but in the back of my mind, I worried. This was safer when I thought he was still hung up on his ex, but he'd been over her all along. He hadn't pushed for anything more than a casual relationship with me, but he was so dangerously matter-of-fact about his breakup, so unnervingly comfortable with it. He was much more emotionally available than I'd previously thought.

*You're being ridiculous.* Ex-fiancée or no, he was leaving in a few months. We knew from the beginning what this was and what it couldn't be. I was only flattering myself if I thought he might try to make it into something more.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that a safety net had just dropped out from under me.

Then Connor's voice brought me back to the present.

"To be honest, I don't know why she'd want to be back together except that it would give her the ability to say 'I have a boyfriend' or 'I'm engaged.' We were miserable together, but she'd rather be miserable together than on her own." He ran a hand through his hair and took a breath. "And there were some things we just couldn't compromise on."

"Such as?"

"She wants kids, for one thing," he said. "Kind of hard to compromise on something like that."

"Didn't she know you'd had a vasectomy?"

He nodded. "She knew about it before we started dating, but I guess she hoped I'd either get it reversed or be

okay with adopting." He shrugged. "She *told* me she was okay with it, that she didn't want kids, but after we got engaged, the truth started coming out."

"So she'd rather be with you, even knowing you'd dig your heels in about something like this?"

"Sure, if it meant not being single."

I couldn't be certain, but I thought there was a bitter edge to his voice.

He took a breath and made a dismissive gesture. "Anyway, that's all in the past." Picking up his empty soda can, he said, "I'm going to grab another. Do you want one?"

After he returned with our drinks, the conversation drifted to somewhat safer topics. Before I knew it, it was almost midnight. Sleep wasn't going to happen anytime soon, but it was worth a try.

"You're welcome to stay if you want," I said. "Just, don't expect much in the way of company, if you know what I mean."

"Oh please," he said. "Like I'm going to ditch you when you're in pain just because we can't fool around."

"It's up to you."

"Of course I'll stay." He leaned down and kissed me lightly. "I just need to go down to my car and get a few things."

I smiled. "Came prepared?"

"I always keep an overnight bag in the car now." He grinned. "Just in case."

"Glad I'm not the only one."

He chuckled. "I'll be right back."

"Wait, before you go," I said. "Would you mind helping me up so I can change clothes?"

"Of course." He stood and offered me a hand, resting the other between my shoulders while I sat up.

Once upright, I sucked in a breath, the fresh pain bringing tears to my eyes. "Fuck, I shouldn't have stayed still for so long." "You okay?"

I nodded, still not breathing. After a moment, the pain receded enough for me to let out my breath. "I'll be fine. Just shouldn't have stayed still so long."

"You're going to be sore either way." He kept his hands on my shoulders while I slowly stood. "Might as well

not overdo it."

"Damn you and your logic," I said.

"Damn you and your stubbornness," he shot back. We exchanged glances. Then he picked up our empty soda cans and headed for the door. "I'll be right back. Don't kill yourself while I'm gone."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"Go."

He laughed and stepped out. After he was gone, I went about getting undressed, moving slowly and gingerly as every stretch and bend sent pain tearing up and down my body. I tried to ignore the fact that tomorrow was undoubtedly going to be worse. A *lot* worse. As much as I hated bowing to the Vicodin altar, it was probably going to be a necessity in a few hours.

*I'll cross that bridge when I get there.* I held my breath and pulled off my shirt, moving as slowly as I could to keep some of the pain at bay. In the mirror, I scrutinized my upper body, inspecting the various marks and bruises. They'd darkened considerably since I saw them at the hospital, and would probably get even uglier before they went away.

It could have been worse. It could have been a *lot* worse. I counted my blessings and reached back to unsnap my bra, but a torrent of fresh pain brought tears to my eyes. I took a few slow, deep breaths, as deep as I could with sore ribs. When it had receded, I tried again, moving slowly this time, but the pain stopped me again.

"Fuck," I muttered, as much from frustration as pain. I held my breath and tried again.

"Here, let me help." Connor's voice startled me. He dropped his overnight bag beside the bed and came over to me.

"I can get it," I said through clenched teeth.

"Probably, but there's no sense causing yourself more pain when someone else can get it for you." He gently grasped my wrists and brought them down to my sides. "I've got it."

"I thought you and bra straps didn't get along." I grinned at him.

"I'll manage. Now turn around."

I did, and he tugged gently at the strap. A second later, it went slack.

"Ha! Got it on the first try," he said, grinning as I turned back around.

"It's easy when you can see what you're doing, isn't it?" I said.

"Hey, don't steal my thunder, woman."

"I could make you do it again with your eyes closed."

"That's assuming you could get it snapped again," he said.

"Damn it," I said. "You and that logic again."

"Wins every time." He flashed me a toothy grin, then we both finished getting ready for bed.

Though settling into bed was an exercise in agony, I finally managed to get comfortable. Connor hesitated to cuddle up against me, afraid he'd jar me or press against a bruise, but after I assured him I wouldn't break, he moved beside me. He draped his arm over my waist, carefully avoiding my ribs, and the heat of his body against mine did wonders for easing some of the pain. "*Ice not heat*," said the good doctor. Yeah, right.

Just as I expected, though, I didn't sleep. Connor's breathing fell into the slow, steady rhythm of slumber, but I was still wide awake, staring into the darkness.

It wasn't the pain that kept me awake, though, nor was it the caffeine from my recent soda. It was this unnerving lack of a safety net. Connor's ex was farther out of the picture than I'd thought. He was over her, which meant he was free to get emotionally involved with someone else. With me, if he was so inclined.

That terrified me because I knew this couldn't last. What if he fell for me the way I was falling for him?

## ***Twenty Four***

For the first couple of days after the incident with Dante, the pain was excruciating. More than once, I wondered if the X-rays had missed a fracture or two in my ribs, but by the third day the pain started to subside. Though I could get around, getting up and down the stairs of my apartment building was too painful unless I absolutely needed to go somewhere.

Fortunately, I didn't need to go anywhere for the first few days. Connor came by to keep me company in the evenings, bringing with him takeout and, when I begged him to, alcohol. Even in a world of pain, there were worse ways to spend an evening than sitting back on the couch with Connor and a couple of beers. I definitely wasn't used to that; Matt had always viewed my injuries, particularly those requiring any type of convalescence, as an inconvenience.

With each passing day, it became clearer and clearer: Connor was nothing like Matt.

*And thank God for that.*

Connor hadn't objected in the slightest to spending time with me every night, even though he knew there was absolutely no chance of anything more than a kiss. For two people involved in a casual, sex-only relationship, it occurred to me after a few days, we certainly did enjoy each other's company even when sex was off the menu.

Finally, the pain took its leave and I could get around without more than a vague twinge here and there. And now that I could get around, there was only one place I wanted to be.



The second he opened his front door, I knew Connor was thinking something. We hadn't made love in over a week, and now that I could finally move, it didn't take a genius to figure out what was on tonight's agenda. That was why we didn't even bother making plans to go out.

"Let's just get together and fuck," he'd said so eloquently when we'd spoken on the phone earlier. Only Connor could be so brazen and be so sexy about it, and knowing what awaited me tonight, I'd struggled all day long to concentrate on even the simplest tasks.

But now, when I walked into his apartment and his lip curled into the most mouthwatering, devious grin I'd ever seen, something told me tonight would be different. Very different.

"What?" I said.

"What?" He batted his eyes.

"That look."

"What look?"

"That one."

He put his hands up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I folded my arms across my chest and eyed him playfully. "You're thinking something."

"I'm thinking nothing."

"That's not what that look says," I said.

He put both hands over his heart and sighed with mock offense. "Dani Blake, are you accusing me of coming up with some sort of diabolical scheme that involves you naked in my bed?"

I laughed. "Yes, I am."

"What kind of pervert do you take me for?" he said.

"Are you suggesting that my accusations are unfounded?"

He put his hands on my hips and kissed me. "Absolutely not."

"So what do you have in mind?"

"You'll see," he murmured into another kiss. Then he paused, cocking his head. "Well, technically you won't, but..." He trailed off, shook his head, and kissed me again.

"Wait, what does that mean?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." He held both of my hands

and tugged me toward him, urging me to follow him when he took one step toward the bedroom, then another.

I resisted, digging my heels in even but not quite keeping myself from laughing. "No, you tell me what you have up your sleeve first."

"Well, where's the fun in that?" He grinned. "Come on, you'll love it."

"Connor—"

"Come on." He pulled a little harder and the devilish grin turned to a boyish, pleading look. "Please?"

"Okay, if you put it like that." I let him lead me into the bedroom, excitement fluttering in my stomach while I tried to figure out what he had in mind.

"I was going to do this the other night," he said, closing the bedroom door behind us. "But with your being hurt, I figured it could wait."

"How kind of you." I eyed him warily. "So what—"

He laughed and pulled me to him, kissing me gently. "Relax. Just trust me."

"I do trust you. Except when you have that particular sparkle in your eyes."

He raised his eyebrows. "What sparkle?"

"*That* one," I said. "Now tell me."

He grinned and played with my hair. "Remember what I said about how touch is so erotic, I could drive you wild without even touching your pussy?"

I shivered. "How could I forget?"

"Well, tonight," he said. "I'm going to prove it."

"Is that right?"

"It is." He kissed me gently. "So, we'll start with taking everything off." He reached for his belt buckle. "But I also have something for you to put on."

Unbuttoning my blouse, I raised an eyebrow. "A strap-on?"

He chuckled. "No. Not a strap-on."

"Oh thank God." I shimmied out of my blouse. "That would have ruined the surprise for tomorrow night."

His eyebrows jumped.

I laughed. "I'm kidding."

"God, I hope so."

"Give me some credit, Connor." I clicked my tongue

and shook my head. "Strap-ons are reserved for special occasions."

He eyed me. "You're feisty tonight, aren't you?"

Unclasping my bra and dropping it on top of my other clothes, I said, "Is that a problem?"

"Not in the least." He folded his jeans over his arm and set them on the dresser. "But I'm calling the shots tonight, so behave yourself."

"And if I don't want to?"

"Well, you don't have to..." He looked at me with what could only be described as puppy dog eyes.

"Okay, when you put it like that," I laughed.

He chuckled and slipped his boxers off. Then he picked a black satin blindfold up off the dresser. Holding it out, he raised his eyebrows.

I bit my lip and took the blindfold, looking at it warily. It was rare that I was willing to surrender my sight like this. Off the cuff, I'd agreed to something like this in the past, but when it came down to putting the blindfold on, I'd balked.

"You okay with wearing that?" He touched my arms gently, and the humor was gone from his voice. "If you're not comfortable with this..."

"No, I'm fine." I gave him a reassuring smile, but couldn't completely ignore the odd feeling that twisted in my gut. Specifically, the fact that I *was* completely comfortable with this.

I slipped the blindfold on, pulling it down over my eyes and trusting him. Trusting him way, way more than I should have trusted someone with whom I had only a casual relationship.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." *I shouldn't be. But I am.*

"Good," he said, a grin in his voice.

Then he fell silent. Though he didn't speak, he moved around me. When he stopped, I was fairly certain he was directly behind me, but couldn't be sure.

I gasped when his hands came to rest on my shoulders. For a moment, they were still, just touching me. Then, one finger at a time lifted off my skin, followed by his palms, leaving only his thumbs on the edges of my shoulder blades. Slowly, he drew them down, tracing parallel lines

down either side of my spine. I shivered, but didn't even realize I'd held my breath until he completely broke contact and I released it.

With sight denied, my other senses had to work harder, and as a result became hyperaware. Even the faintest stimuli drew my attention, whether it was the whisper of his breath against my skin or a single fingertip trailing down my arm. I picked up on the minutiae that would have otherwise gone unnoticed: the carpet crushing beneath his feet whenever he moved around me. The slow, controlled rhythm of his breathing. The jump of my own pulse whenever he touched me.

Fingers trailed down my arm. Then along the curve of my waist and the swell of my hip. After sweeping my hair over my shoulder, he ran a barely-touching fingertip down the side of my neck. Every touch, however light, made my breath catch.

He didn't say a word. Aside from my neck, he didn't touch me anywhere I could have considered erogenous. Nevertheless, every time he touched me, he sent shivers down my spine, each more intense than the last. Soon that tingling spread to my clit, coaxing the very earliest warmth of intense arousal into existence.

Stepping around in front of me, Connor took my hands in his. Were his hands always that warm? They weren't as calloused as mine; he had the soft hands of a man who made his living at a keyboard, not with reins and saddles. Nerve endings all over my body tingled to life at the thought of all the places those gentle, smooth hands had touched me before and would touch me again.

He guided me forward. I guessed he was drawing me toward the bed, assuming I wasn't completely disoriented and remembered which way I was facing. I followed his lead and he patiently waited for each blind, tentative step I took.

After we'd gone a few steps, he stopped, so I did the same. Then he put his hands on my hips and turned me, gently nudging me against the bed.

"Lie back," he whispered. "However is comfortable."

I hoisted myself onto the bed and searched for the pillows. When I found them, I did as he asked. The bed

creaked softly each time I shifted my weight, and the comforter and pillows rustled while I lay on my back.

More rustling and creaking announced that he'd joined me and was lying beside me.

For a long moment, he didn't move. He didn't speak. Only the heat of his body close to mine and his near-silent breathing told me he was still there at all.

When he broke the silence, his voice was soft, but resonated across my nerve endings as if he'd spoken right next to my skin. "I've always thought," he said, almost whispering. "that there is nothing in the world as sexy as the feeling of skin..." He laid his hand across my belly, the sudden contact taking my breath away. "...on skin."

He lifted his hand, but didn't take it away completely. At first I thought the residual warmth on my skin was my imagination, an after image of his touch, but when that warmth moved, I realized his hand still hovered just above my skin. I followed that warmth, my mind's eye superimposing his hand over my arm, my breast, my side. What began as a vague hint of proximity became acute awareness, the mere nearness of his hand making my nerves react as if he was touching me. And the more he teased me with this near-touch, the more I wanted the real thing. Nerve endings tingled when his hand came near, as if trying to reach for him. With millimeters of nothing separating us, I ached for his touch.

His hand passed over my hipbone and paused just above my pussy. With every second he lingered there, my heart raced a little faster, matching the maddening pulsing from my clit.

"You want me to touch you, don't you?" he whispered. His breath caressed my neck like I desperately wished his hand would do to my pussy.

I wetted my lips. "Yes, I do."

He laughed softly, the tantalizing coolness of his breath raising goose bumps all over me. "I will, don't you worry."

His hand was moving again, this time coming back up toward my chest. My hips lifted slightly, trying to follow him, and I released a frustrated whimper.

I expected him to say something else, to playfully

taunt me a little more, so my senses preemptively focused where his breath would brush my skin.

In that moment, when my guard was down, a single fingertip drew a gentle circle around my nipple and I gasped, my spine lifting off the bed. His finger left electricity in its wake, tingling just beneath my skin as he drew circle after circle.

"Like that?" he whispered. I murmured an affirmative, my entire body trembling as he finally touched me, as he *barely* touched me. That fingertip followed the curve of my breast, then drifted across my chest, drawing with it my complete and total focus. Nothing existed but that point of contact. He teased, aroused, tantalized. All with the touch of a single fingertip.

Then his palm joined his fingertip, resting on my belly just as he'd done earlier, but now my skin tingled beneath his. I bit my lip and wriggled against his hand as if some part of my mind, aroused beyond reason, thought to get every inch of my skin beneath his palm and fingertips, as if I could somehow divide that gentle, intense warmth over every nerve ending that would have it.

My breath caught when his hand moved to my side. Holding every last iota of my focus and awareness in the palm of his hand, he traced a slow, meandering path down my side, over my hip, down my thigh. His fingers dipped to the back of my knee, pausing to make a slow, light circle that lifted both my knee and back off the bed.

"Oh, my God," I murmured, vaguely aware of bed sheets bunching in my clawing fingers, but mostly distracted by the warm softness of his touch trailing down the back of my calf.

"Like that?" There was a hint of laughter in his whispered words.

I nodded, whimpering when his hand came back up and inched dangerously close to my pussy. I held my breath, wondering if I'd lose my mind faster if he did or didn't touch my clit.

At the last possible second, his hand changed direction and drifted over my hipbone instead, and I released my breath, unsure if it was a sigh of relief or a frustrated exhalation.

He cupped my breast, his thumb circling my nipple as his finger had done earlier. I whimpered again.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Connor," I breathed.

"See what I mean?" he said. "All I've done is touch you."

I squirmed beneath his hand's gentle, powerful presence. "All you've done is *tease* me."

"Tease you?" He laughed. "Are you suggesting that any of this has been unpleasant?"

"Not at all, just..." I bit my lip, moaning when his thumb changed direction.

"Just what?"

I pulled in a breath from the electrified air. "Frustrating."

"What a terrible thing for me to do, frustrating you like that." Lifting his hand away, he shifted beside me. "*If I profane with my unworthiest hand,*" he whispered. "*This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand—*" His breath warmed my skin, announcing his mouth's proximity to my breast. "*To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.*" His lips closed around my nipple. He teased it with his tongue while his hands slid under my arching back.

"*Good pilgrim, you—*" I paused, trying to remember the line. "*You do wrong your hand too much, which—*" It was there, somewhere in my memory, but too many years had gone by, or maybe the touch of Connor's lips was just too sensual and distracting. "*Which...*"

He released a warm breath of laughter against my skin and kissed his way up my chest. Gently grasping my forearm while he spoke, he took over: "*Which mannerly devotion shows in this...*" His hand moved down to my wrist. "*...for saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,*" He laid my arm back on the pillow beside me. "*...and palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.*" His palm covered mine and our fingers laced together.

I exhaled and when some of that warmth returned to my lips, I knew he was close. Swallowing hard, I said, "I thought you weren't a fan of *Romeo and Juliet*."

Another laugh, another whisper of breath on skin that needed to be touched. "I never said I didn't like it, just that

it's not much of a love story." He brought my other arm up and pinned it as well. "It is, however, sexy as hell in places."

Heat moved past my jaw, but the gentle contact of his lips to my neck startled me nonetheless. Kissing his way up, he murmured, "*O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do; They pray—grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.*"

From some deep recesses of my memory, the words came: "*Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.*"

His lips broke contact, but his voice thrummed against my skin when he whispered, "*Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.*"

The second his lips met mine, I swore an orgasm was only a breath away. Never had I been so acutely aware of the light scuff of his stubble or the softness of his lips. He alternately warmed and cooled the side of my face each time he breathed in, then out.

He squeezed my hands and I responded in kind when he lowered himself to me, letting his chest touch mine. A single fingertip had driven me insane, but now this closeness of his entire body wasn't enough. I wanted more. Needed more.

Hooking my leg around his, I ran my foot up the back of his calf. He broke the kiss with a gasp, then whispered, "Do you understand what I was talking about? About how erotic it is just to touch?"

I nodded, licking my lips and searching for another taste of his mouth. He granted me a brief, light kiss, then was once again out of my reach.

"Connor..." The words were there, I knew they were. "Connor, I..." My fingers twitched in his, and the brush of his thumb down the side of my hand did nothing to help me remember how to speak.

"I love seeing you this turned on," he breathed. "And all I've done is touch you."

"I want..."

"Tell me." He kissed the underside of my jaw and I brought my leg up, hooking it around his waist, my teeth chattering when his cock brushed my pussy and he exhaled against my chin.

"Touch me," I whispered. "Touch me more."

His lips pulled into a grin against my neck. "I think I



know exactly how you want me to touch you." Releasing one of my wrists, he guided his cock to me and pressed against me, letting only the head tease me. "I think I know exactly *where* you want me to touch you."

I moaned, raising my hips, seeking him.

"Is that what you want, Dani?" he whispered, breathing just below my ear. "Do you want me inside you?" The unsteadiness in his voice turned the teasing question into a thinly-veiled plea. The tremor in his hand, the raggedness of his breath on my skin, those little things I would have missed had I been able to see, all conspired to reveal that he wasn't as controlled as he let on.

"Tell me, Dani."

"Yes," I said.

"I want to hear you say it." The line between teasing and begging blurred, but became decidedly clearer when he added in a hoarse whisper, "*Please*."

"Yes, I want—" The words lodged in my throat when Connor kissed my neck again. "I want you inside me."

He said nothing. A catch of his breath signaled impending movement a second before his entire body shifted. His hips brushed my inner thighs, his presence over me rose, and he was inside me.

And there he stopped.

For the longest time, we were both still. Just breathing. Being.

When at last he moved, it wasn't to withdraw and push in again. His torso twisted slightly to one side. Then his opposite hand caressed my face, fingertips drifting up my cheek to the string holding the blindfold on.

"I don't think we need this anymore." He gently tugged the blindfold off.

I blinked until my vision focused, and when it did, all I saw was Connor's eyes. We both stopped, simply looking at each other. There was something unnervingly intense about the way he looked at me. Looked *into* me. As if he could see layers of me that either I didn't intend to show or didn't know existed.

If his startled expression was to be believed, this wasn't on tonight's agenda when he'd greeted me at the door earlier.

He started to speak. Hesitated. Took a breath. "Dani, I—" But before he could finish, he kissed me.

Our mouths moved, and so too did our bodies. He withdrew slowly, slid back in just as slowly. I rolled my hips with him, gained speed with him. With a gasp, he broke the kiss, but not his rhythm.

Whatever it was, that unnamed something in his eyes, it echoed in his every motion. Maybe it was just my hyperawareness lingering even after my sight was restored, but I doubted it. Even as he thrust faster, everything seemed to happen in slow, fluid motion, my nerves aware of every last place we touched, whether it was his cock brushing my G-spot or his soft, cool hair between my fingers.

And all the while, that look remained in his eyes. He held my gaze with a deep, burning intensity that I could neither identify nor define. It was only when he closed his eyes and came down to kiss me that he broke that eye contact, but the intensity remained in and around us.

He fucked me faster and my lips could barely remember what to do with his. All my body understood was the orgasm that neared with every stroke, but there was something there, something between us, something on the tip of both his tongue and mine, and only our clumsy attempts at kissing kept it at bay.

The blindfolded teasing had left my skin so wildly sensitive that every place he touched me now may as well have been erogenous. When the sole of my foot brushed over his calf, when his hips moved between my inner thighs, when his shoulders warmed my fingers and palms, the effect was no different than the head of his cock sliding over my G-spot. My mind had earlier sought to simultaneously feel his touch on every nerve ending that could take it, and for all the electricity surging across and beneath my skin, I wondered if I'd succeeded.

My lips somehow formed a few intelligible words, begging him not to stop. Then his name rolled off my tongue and onto his lips, and his kiss sent me out of my mind. He didn't stop, didn't slow down, just kept kissing me and thrusting hard and fast as my orgasm went on and on and on, never once breaking his rhythm until he, too, lost control.

With a gasp and a shudder, his back arched and he closed his eyes. "Oh fuck," he moaned. "Oh fuck, that's—" With one final deep, hard, thrust, he threw his head back and roared. I kept rolling my hips, squeezing and releasing to draw his orgasm out, and I didn't stop until he sank down to me with a soft whimper.

We were both out of breath, both trembling, and we held onto each other while the room spun around us.

Connor pushed himself up on trembling arms. Our eyes met, and there it was again. No, there it was *still*. That intense...something.

For the longest time, we were silent, simply looking at each other. When the silence was broken, it was with my name.

"Dani," he whispered. His fingertips trailed tenderly down the side of my face. "I know I shouldn't, but..."

*Oh God, I wasn't imagining it.* I swallowed. "Connor..."

"Maybe this is a moot point with, you know, with our circumstances," he said. "But it just is, and I can't convince myself that I don't—"

"I love you."

We stared at each other. His lips were still parted for the words he hadn't finished saying, and he neither breathed nor finished his thought. Whether or not he'd intended to say the same thing, I didn't know. I didn't care.

The words were out and couldn't be erased, and I didn't have it in me to care about the consequences. The only thing I cared about just then was the truth that had finally caught up with me.

I loved him.

I touched his face and drew him down to me.

Just before our lips met, he whispered, "I love you, Dani." I put my arms around him, he slid his hands under my back, and we simply kissed.

I could love him. I could be in love with him. It wasn't like I could force myself not to. Even falling dangerously in love with him like this still had the safety net of August.

August couldn't be avoided and would hurt like hell when it came and went, but for now, I couldn't deny the truth.

I was in love with Connor.

## ***Twenty Five***

Time came and went entirely too quickly, and before I knew it, it was July. Two weeks after his graduation, Connor left for San Francisco. He flew out on Saturday, and I would join him the following Friday for a few days.

In my otherwise empty apartment, I was restless. I found anything and everything I could do to keep idleness at bay, because when I slowed down, time did too. By the time I'd finished reorganizing my CDs and DVDs, dusting, rearranging my trophy case, and hand-washing the dishes instead of putting them in the dishwasher, it was only one o'clock in the afternoon.

I flopped onto the couch and sighed, glaring at the clock on the DVD player. This week would be hell. It wasn't just the fact that I was killing time. In a matter of weeks, I'd have more time on my hands than I could kill. Every minute without him now was just something to be endured until I was with him again. *So what am I going to do when he's gone?*

"This is pathetic." I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. Shaking my head, I pushed myself up off the couch and went into the kitchen. There, I poured myself a glass of cranberry juice. I considered throwing in a shot of vodka, but decided against it. The walls in this apartment were closing in quickly, and it was only a matter of time before I had to get the hell out of here. Might as well be sober in case I decided to hit the road.

I chewed my lip and stared into my drink. Maybe going to San Francisco with him, even for the weekend, was

a bad idea. Interstate flights to see each other took this relationship out of the realms booty calls and friends with benefits, planting it firmly into something that was worth the headache of airport security and sardine-can seating.

Then again, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, we'd long since stepped out of those realms. When I wasn't looking, I'd gone and fallen in love with him, which would make the end of this a hell of a lot more painful. And no matter how much I wanted to fantasize that it wasn't, his move to California would be the kiss of death for this relationship. A long distance relationship was a bad idea. Maintaining something like that only created more stress while it delayed the inevitable. If we were going to put a thousand miles between us, we might as well just call it quits and get it over with rather than draw it out.

I drained my drink and set the glass in the sink. Then I grabbed my purse off the counter, pulled out my keys, and headed out. Even as I locked the door behind me and went downstairs, carefully ignoring the place on the stairwell where my mind's eye wanted to superimpose an image of us, I didn't know where I was going, only that I was going.

I started the car and put my seatbelt on. Staring out the windshield, I pursed my lips, trying to decide which way to go.

The sun shone brightly in a clear sky. Good day for a trail ride. Without giving it another thought, I pulled out of the parking lot and started toward the barn.

The gravel parking area beside the barn was packed with the familiar cars of clients and boarders. When I stepped into the aisle, every set of cross-ties was occupied and the rafters echoed with chattering voices and clattering hooves. The arena was undoubtedly just as crowded, so it was just as well I was going for a trail ride.

I didn't even bother with a saddle. Instead, I grabbed my bridle and a brush out of the tack room and slipped out to the pasture where Calypso was turned out. When I whistled for him, he looked up from grazing, grass hanging out of his mouth and ears pricked up. He greeted me with a shrill whinny and trotted to the gate when I stepped into the pasture.

"Hey, you." I scratched his neck. He sniffed my

pockets, searching for grain or candy, and I laughed. It didn't matter what was on my mind, their childlike innocence and adoration always melted my heart.

I ran the brush over him, getting rid of some of the dried mud that had crusted on his coat after his morning roll. A pig didn't enjoy mud as much as Calypso did. Still, he was easier to clean than a blanket, and just brushing him was enough to soothe some of my nerves. I must have spent hours grooming my two horses after Matt and I split.

I needed a little more than that today, though, so I put the brush aside and lifted the bridle off the fencepost where I'd hung it. Calypso put his head down, looking at me as if to say, "Aww, Mom, do we have to?"

"Come on, you like trail rides." I pressed the bit against his lips. He tried to turn away, but I pulled him back and nudged his mouth again. After a second, he reluctantly opened it to take the bit. "There, see? That's not so bad." He just quietly chewed on it while I fastened the throatlatch and cavesson.

I opened the gate, then hoisted myself onto Calypso's back. As soon as the farm was fading behind us, my stomach started to settle. One by one, my nerves calmed while Calypso plodded down the narrow, sun-dappled trail through the woods. The world around us was silent except for the dull cadence of hooves on dirt.

My stomach still kept itself tied in knots, but I was infinitely more relaxed than when I left my apartment. This would be a long ride, of that I had no doubt. The longer I rode, the better I'd feel. Out here, nothing else mattered. Just a woman and her horse, leaving the rest of the universe to its worries and stresses. I knew of no better way to escape.

When the trail split, I steered Calypso to the left. We had no one to race, but I needed the adrenaline rush of a few sprints up some hills.

Up ahead, the trail swept upward into a long, steep hill. Calypso danced sideways, chomping at his bit. I knew what he wanted, and normally I'd make him walk when he got antsy like this, but today, I wanted the same thing he did.

Holding on with my thighs, I leaned forward and

prodded him gently with my heel. Like a shot from a cannon, he burst into a gallop and thundered up the hill. I eased my grip on the reins and just let him go, closing my eyes against the wind that whipped my hair and clothes.

At the top of the hill, I brought him back down to a walk, patting his neck while he caught his breath and continued up the trail. My heart pounded and my skin tingled from the wind. Though my worries still coiled themselves in my stomach, they were quieter now, grudgingly allowing themselves to be pushed aside and stressed over later.

Yes, this was what I needed. I'd heard it said that there was nothing a good day on a horse couldn't cure, and today, I realized how true that was. This wouldn't solve everything in my life. It wouldn't make my relationship with Connor any easier to leave behind, it wouldn't get me back to Cheyenne, it wouldn't make my boss a tolerable human being. But it made me feel better now, and that was as much as I could ask for.

Closing in on another hill, Calypso danced sideways. I gathered my reins, leaned forward, and let him carry me away from the rest of the world.

## ***Twenty Six***

My ringing cell phone startled me.

I muted the television and picked my phone up off the coffee table. As soon as I saw the caller ID, I groaned aloud. Connor had been in California for a few days and I was much too busy being pathetic and feeling sorry for myself to deal with Matt, but he was calling anyway.

Knowing him, he'd leave a voice message if I ignored his call. If I ignored the message, he'd call again. Might as well nip it in the bud now.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dani," he said.

"What's up?" I tried not to sound as irritated as I was, but didn't particularly care if I did.

"Listen, you know that stuff you picked up a while back?"

I craned my neck and gave the unopened boxes beside the couch a quick look. They were still in the same place I'd unceremoniously dumped them a week or two after I'd picked them up, when they were taking up too much space in my trunk. "Yeah, it's all right here."

"I think I might have given you the wrong box," he said. "I still have one here that's got your stuff in it, and I'm missing a box of—" He paused. "Some stuff I need."

"Let me take a look." I pushed myself up off the couch and didn't bother trying to hide the groan of annoyance as I did. Cradling the phone on my shoulder, I opened the first box.



This was definitely my stuff: A few photos, some candles, a pair of shoes I vaguely remembered looking for a while ago. I set it aside and reached for the other box.

"Do you see anything?" he asked.

"Hold on, I'm looking in the second one now." I moved the phone to my other shoulder and pulled open the second box's flaps. As soon as I did, I couldn't help but clench my teeth.

A little wooden box I'd never seen before. Three or four romance paperbacks. A shimmery purple jacket that was *definitely* not mine.

"This must be what you're looking for," I said. "I'm assuming it's not yours?"

"Um, no, it's—" He cleared his throat. "Anyway, yeah, I need to get that from you."

"I'll bring it over."

"Dani, thanks, if it's not too much trouble."

"It's fine. I need to get out of the house for a bit anyway." *And I'd rather you didn't know where I live.* "I can be there in twenty or so."

"Well, okay," he said. "It's your call."

"I'll be there in a few."

I threw my purse on top of the offending box and left my apartment before I had a chance to talk myself into not going to Matt's. Though "something to do" beat sitting at home and wishing Connor was there, visiting my ex wasn't high on my list. Still, the sooner I got his—*her*—things out of my house, the better.

On the drive over, it occurred to me more than once that she might be there. I wondered what she was like, this woman whose existence had never been directly confirmed. Thus far, I knew her only as an abstract shape of a person, a collection of nebulous hints that alluded to her existence. She liked *Vogue*. She wore shimmery purple jackets, drank espresso, and read romance. She kept houseplants alive and kept warm one side of a bed that used to be mine.

It still stung that someone had moved into my world before my relationship with Matt was lukewarm in the grave, but I couldn't find the energy to be jealous. Whatever part of my mind once manufactured things like jealousy and bitterness was occupied now with creating copious amounts

of impatience and longing for this week to be over so I could be in Connor's arms again.

I smiled to myself when I pulled into the parking lot. Though Connor's departure in a few short weeks was sure to hurt like hell, he'd certainly gotten Matt out of my mind. I'd finally gotten over him. *Getting over Connor is going to be an entirely differ—*

"No need to worry about that now," I said aloud, banishing the thoughts from my mind. I got out of the car and grabbed the box from the backseat.

At Matt's door, I shifted the box onto one hip and knocked. In an instant, the room on the other side was alive with voices—male *and* female—and movement. The male voice came nearer and I recognized Matt's irritated growl.

He opened the door and I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing at his flustered expression.

"Come on in," he muttered, standing aside and waving me across the threshold.

A brunette stood on the other side of the living room, hips cocked and arms folded across her chest. Her lips twisted into a scowl and she glared at Matt.

"Does she *need* to come in?"

Matt let out a hiss of breath. "Jesus, Lynn—"

I shifted my weight. "I don't have to stay. If I'm intruding, I can just take my stuff and go."

Lynn opened her mouth to speak, but a pointed look from Matt stopped her. The fury in her eyes told me he was going to hear about it after I left.

"I guess I should at least introduce you two," he said. "Uh, Dani, this is Lynn." He gestured toward her and they exchanged looks. The lift of her eyebrows and the tightness in her lips said loud and clear that he was in deep shit if he said the wrong thing. Or didn't say the right thing. Clearing his throat, he looked me in the eye and added, "My girlfriend."

At that, she smiled, but the narrowness of her eyes made it look more like a sneer.

"Oh." I offered a much more genuine smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," she growled.

"Well, I, um, I'd better go." I inched toward the door.

"Wait," Lynn said. "Before she goes, I want to make sure everything is here." The thinly-veiled accusation probably should have offended me, but her hostility was almost comical. I had to fight to keep from grinning.

"Lynn, she's not going to *steal* anything." Matt sounded disgusted. "I'm sure it's all—" He stopped when she glared at him. To me, he said, "You don't mind?"

"No, not at all." *Especially because it's obviously making you uncomfortable.*

While Lynn opened the box, Matt's eyes darted back and forth from me to her, from his past to his present. He looked about as comfortable as a mouse between two cats.

Then he jumped like he'd been shocked. "Oh, I almost forgot. I need to get that box of your stuff." He made a quick escape, leaving me alone with Lynn.

She crouched and rifled through the box, inspecting each item as if she expected to find some minute vandalism. Her mouth twisted into an ugly sneer when she picked up the shimmery purple jacket, and her eyes flicked toward me before she tossed the jacket on a nearby chair. For a second, she eyed it as if it was stained simply from being in my home for a few weeks. Then she closed the flaps on the box and stood. "Looks like it's all there."

"Should be," I said. "I didn't even open it until he called, and then I just put it in the car."

She glanced at me and sniffed. I swore she was disappointed that she hadn't found something in that box to piss her off.

"Matt!" she screeched down the hall. "Hurry up."

Something rustled in another room, then Matt called back, "Just a minute, it's under a few things in here."

Lynn huffed and folded her arms across her chest. In a way, I felt sorry for her. She was probably perfectly pleasant when she wasn't blindsided by her man's ex like this. Knowing Matt, he hadn't told her I was coming until minutes before I came to the door. Still, I couldn't help but find her attitude amusing.

I looked around the apartment. All the little changes I'd noticed before had an identity now. The plants were hers. The magazines had her name on them. The coffee cup beside the espresso maker had her lipstick on the edge.

"Love what you've done with the place," I said, making sure to sound as genuinely pleasant as I could.

She folded her arms across her chest and looked around, surveying her territory. "Just needed a woman's touch, I guess." The lift of her eyebrow sought a reaction from my face, but I offered none.

"I always thought it would look nice with some houseplants," I said, admiring a potted plant on the end table a foot or so away from me.

She said nothing. Whether or not it was my imagination, I couldn't say, but I thought for sure I heard an indignant growl coming from the back of her throat, muffled by her tightly drawn lips. My own lips were all that stood between me and letting her know just how much her attitude amused me. I pressed them together, smothering a laugh.

Fortunately, Matt chose just that moment to reappear, carrying a box in front of him. "This should be all of your stuff."

I took it from him. "Thanks."

"Do you want to have a look and make sure?" he asked, eyes darting toward Lynn.

I shook my head. "No, it's fine. I'll go through it when I get home."

"Um, okay," he said. "Well, uh, call me if anything is missing."

"Will do." I started toward the door, but paused. "Nice to meet you, Lynn." I smiled at her, knowing it irritated her to no end. She gave me the same half-smile, half-sneer as earlier, then went into the kitchen.

Matt walked me to the door. "Thanks for bringing that stuff by." He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Sorry she wasn't very polite."

I shrugged. "Don't worry about it. She probably doesn't like your ex on her turf." The words echoed in my mind. *Her turf*. Funny how it barely registered that this was once *my* turf, that it was once my *home*, but all I could think now was *keep it, sweetheart, and everything that comes with it*.

"Well, she didn't have to be rude," he said. "Anyway, thanks."

"No problem." I shifted the box on my hip. "Thanks for

holding onto this stuff for me."

"You're welcome," he said quietly. He chewed his lip and dropped his gaze. There was something on his mind. Something he was working up the nerve to say.

I didn't know what it was, only that I didn't care to hear it. Our time for uncomfortable discussions, difficult questions, and awkward confessions had long since passed, so I took a step away from the door.

"I'd better go," I said. "I still have some errands to run. Thanks again."

He startled, his lips parting as if to protest. For a moment, I thought he was going to ask me to wait while he tried to say whatever it was on his mind, but he bit it back. "Sure. No problem. I'll, um, I'll see you around."

"See you around, Matt." I turned on my heel, walked away, and didn't look back.

## ***Twenty Seven***

My plane touched down at the San Francisco International Airport at just after ten on Friday night.

Though I hadn't checked any baggage, Connor said he'd meet me by the baggage carousel since it was a fairly central location. I followed the crowd and the signs, every indicator of "*Baggage Claim—This Way*" making my heart beat a little faster. After a few dirty Connorgrams on my cell phone and nearly a week's worth of nights spent wishing he was in my bed, it was all I could do not to break into a run just to get to him a few seconds sooner.

Up ahead, like a glowing beacon intended solely to drive me out of my mind, was a sign that simply said, "*Baggage Claim.*"

My heart pounded and I walked faster, my palm sweating on the plastic handle of the small suitcase rolling beside me. That man was in for the night of his life when we got to the hotel. There were things he could do to me that I just couldn't take care of on my own, and everything I'd done to take the edge off had only made it worse.

"It's just a few days," I'd told myself the whole time. It wasn't like I hadn't gone without sex before. Then again, going without sex wasn't quite the same as going without sex *with Connor*.

I walked faster.

Even this late at night, the area around the carousels was crowded, but I found him immediately. I saw him in the same instant he looked up from his phone, and his smile made my temperature soar. It was the opposite effect he'd

had on me at the horse show. There, he'd created an undercurrent of calm that kept me sane when the rest of the world conspired to do otherwise.

The only way he would be able to calm me down now involved throwing me down on the nearest flat surface.

We shouldered our way through the crowd and when we finally got to each other, he threw his arms around me and kissed me. Thankfully, he held me tight enough to keep me upright when my knees tried to go out from under me.

"God, I missed you," he said.

"I missed you too." I was suddenly out of breath and it had nothing to do with my walking sprint across the terminal. Pulling him closer, I kissed him again.

He looked at me and smiled, running his fingers through my hair. Though noise and voices rattled the air all around us, it all disappeared when he leaned in and whispered, "We said in the beginning we had to get in as much time in bed together as possible, right?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

He kissed just below my ear and said, "So why don't we get out of here and get to our room so we can make up for lost time?"

All the air left my lungs in one sharp exhalation.

Laughing softly, he kissed me again. "Let's go."

I reached for the handle on my suitcase, but his hand was already there. With a smile, he nodded toward the exit. As we turned and walked out, he slipped his free hand into mine. *Ahh, now my world is almost back on its axis.*

Short term parking wasn't a great distance away, and Connor had managed to snag a space fairly close to the door.

"A Chevy Malibu?" I smirked when he gestured at the rental car. "That's a bit of a switch from a Jeep, isn't it?"

"Hey, it was all they had available."

I tried not to laugh. "I don't know, it sort of suits you. I mean—"

"It's a long walk to the hotel, smartass," he growled.

I snorted. "Please, you won't make me walk."

"Won't I?"

"No, you won't."

He stopped and folded his arms across his chest,

fighting a losing battle against the grin that tried to pull up the corner of his lip. "And just what makes you so sure of that?"

I slid my hand over the front of his jeans and whispered, "Because if I have to walk, you'll have to wait that much longer to fuck me."

He gulped, closing his eyes when I gently squeezed him. Without a word, he pulled the keys out of his pocket and popped the trunk.

I winked at him. "That's what I thought."

"Guess it's a good thing I got a hotel that's close by." He set my suitcase in the trunk and I handed him my backpack.

"How close is close by?"

He slammed the trunk lid, then turned and put his hands on my face. "Not nearly close enough, but it'll have to do." He gave me a quick kiss before he nodded toward the car. "Shall we?"

It was his custom to open my door, but today, we were in too much of a hurry to bother with chivalry. Every second between now and stepping into the hotel that was close but not nearly close enough was too much.

We left the airport and headed up the freeway, making mundane conversation just to pass the time. When he pulled onto San Bruno, my heart pounded. This was a main drag, but not an expressway. I didn't know exactly where our hotel was, but it had to be close now.

Ignoring my skyrocketing pulse, I said, "So, how has your trip been so far?"

He shrugged. "Busy, mostly. Looking for a place to live, talking to some of the professors and advisors at the university. Crap like that."

"No time for any touristy stuff?"

"Oh, a little," he said. "but I figured I'd save the good stuff until you got here though."

"The good stuff? Such as?"

"Well, you said you wanted to see Alcatraz. Then there's Fisherman's Wharf, that sort of thing." The light changed to yellow and Connor slowed down. As he did, he slid his arm around my shoulders, pulling me a little closer while the car came to a gentle stop. The light turned red.



"And *that* gives us about twenty-five seconds."

"Twenty—"

His mouth was suddenly against mine, kissing me passionately. It was easily the shortest twenty-five seconds of my life, and before I'd even had a chance to really taste his kiss, he broke away, returning to the driver's seat and accelerating just when the light turned green.

Dizzy and panting, I said, "You knew just how to time that, didn't you?"

He grinned. "Damn right. I knew I'd never make it from the airport to the hotel without kissing you again." He glanced at me and winked. "So I made sure I bought myself some time."

I wet my lips. "You knew that particular light would be red?"

"Nope," he said. "But I figured the odds were good we'd catch at least a couple of red lights."

"So you picked that one and hoped for the best?"

He laughed. "Who says I only figured out one intersection? I like to stack the deck in my favor, you know? So I—" He paused, squinting through the windshield. "In fact, that's Huntington Avenue, and if I'm correct..." He trailed off, taking his foot off the gas to lose just a little bit of speed.

The light stayed green.

"Damn it," he muttered, accelerating. Just when he crossed the white line, the signal turned yellow. "Well that fucking figures."

Though I laughed, I was as frustrated as he was. *Come on, stupid lights. Help me out here.*

We passed several more cross streets, none of which had traffic lights, but as we approached El Camino Royale, the light was green.

Under his breath, Connor whispered, "Come on, come on, come on..." My heart thumped in time with his barely audible pleas.

When the signal changed, my pulse soared and my mouth watered. He brought the car to a stop, and I met him halfway across the console. I didn't know how much time we had, didn't have a clue how he could keep track, didn't care if we sat through three or four cycles of the light. I wanted

him. God, I wanted him. And the more I tasted him now after a few days of being apart, the more I needed him.

A car horn honked behind us and Connor quickly returned to the driver's side, waving an apology as he spun the tires and peeled across the intersection.

"Didn't time that one as well as you thought?" I asked through teeth that were on the verge of chattering.

"Lost count." He was breathless now too. The Malibu's engine whined, and though I couldn't be sure, in the flicker of passing streetlights, Connor's knuckles looked white on the steering wheel.

Another light came into view. "How long does that one stay red?" I asked.

"Don't know. But I don't plan on stopping there long enough anyway." Before I could ask why, he switched on the turn signal and slowed down. I glanced to the right, and the signs for several hotels glowed in the distance. One of them had to be ours. It had to be.

When he turned the corner and started down Elm Avenue, I leaned forward and reached under the back of my shirt.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just saving you some time." My bra went slack and, with a few quick motions of my arms under my shirt, I pulled it out of my sleeve. I dropped it on the seat between us. Connor sucked in a breath.

"Jesus," he whispered. The turn signal came on again, and I could barely breathe as the Malibu turned into the parking lot beside the Marriott. By the time he'd shifted into park and killed the engine, I was already out of the car, and he wasn't far behind. Leaving my bra in the front seat and my backpack and suitcase in the trunk, we walked as fast as we could into the hotel lobby.

Connor hit the button for the elevator and we both stared at the glowing number three above the doors. His arm was around my waist, and I was certain his fingers would burn right through my clothes if that elevator didn't get here soon.

The three went dark. The two lit up.

"Come on..." His fingers twitched against my hip.

Machinery whirled and hummed behind the double doors, and a second later, the familiar bell echoed through the lobby. The elevator opened and three people shuffled out, struggling with suitcases and luggage carts. We stood aside, Connor holding the door to make *damned* sure it didn't close before we got in. Once the other guests were out of the way, we stepped in and he pressed the button for the third floor. Then he hit the "close doors" button a few times, swearing under his breath while they stayed open for one, two, three seconds too goddamned many.

Finally, they started to close and we both released our breath. The doors had barely come together, sealing us inside this tiny private world, before my back was against the wall and Connor's lips were against mine. His thick erection dug into my hip, making every nerve ending in my body sizzle with maddening anticipation. My fingers grasped his hair and the side of his neck, unwilling to let him go for even a breath until I absolutely had to.

My need for him teetered precariously between painful and *too* painful. Through the haze, a thought flickered through my mind—*I'm not supposed to need you this much*—but Connor's hand tightened in my hair and the thought was gone as quickly as it had come.

I didn't even feel the elevator stop, but the soft *ding* politely nudged us out of our embrace and back into reality. Connor held my hips and stood behind me, no doubt to keep anyone on the other side of the doors from seeing his hard-on. When the elevator opened, though, the hallway was deserted. He took my hand and we half-walked, half-jogged past the numbered rooms.

"Here it is," he murmured, leaning me up against the door of room three twenty-seven. He kissed me just as passionately and desperately as he had in the elevator, but only one hand touched me. The other, I assumed, searched his pocket for the room key.

The card key clicked into the reader, then beeped. Connor turned the handle on the door, and I had a split second to realize we were both using the door for balance before it went out from behind me. His arm around my waist kept me from falling, but we both stumbled. Inside the room, he leaned against the door and pulled me with him, and for

a moment we were safe from gravity.

We kicked shoes off and started toward the bed, but hadn't gotten our shoes far enough out of the way. I stumbled over one, then his feet tangled up in mine, and we had just enough time to break the kiss and curse before we went down. I tried to catch myself on the edge of the bed. Missed. Landed on my back. The impact knocked a huff of breath out of me, but Connor's hand in my hair kept me from hitting my head on the floor.

"Christ, Dani, are you okay? Did—"

I seized his shirt and hauled him down to me, kissing him frantically. I'm sure something hurt from tumbling to the floor like that, but I just didn't care.

Connor returned my kiss just as desperately, sliding his tongue alongside mine and releasing sharp breaths across the side of my face. Shifting onto one arm, he reached between us and unfastened my jeans. I took his cue and went for his belt. The bed was mere inches away, but to hell with it. Moving meant stopping.

His belt buckle jingled free and he shivered when I drew the zipper down. He pushed himself up on his arms and we both looked down while we struggled to get his jeans and boxers over his hips. He kicked them off, then sat up. I lifted my hips and he hooked his fingers over my waistband. He slid my jeans off, then tossed them onto his, but he didn't come back down to me.

"Come here." He offered me his hands and pulled me upright. I straddled him and he leaned back against the bed we'd failed to reach.

"Oh God," I murmured, letting my head fall back while he guided me down onto his cock. Every inch of my body, inside and out, tingled as he slid deeper inside me, his touch flooding my senses with *yes, he's here, yes, he's here, yes, he's here*.

"Fuck, I've missed you so much," he moaned, gripping my hips and thrusting upward. I rose and fell, my breath catching every time his cock brushed my G-spot or his body pressed against my clit.

His hands moved higher, tangling in my hair and drawing me into a breathless kiss. No matter how awkward this position was, no matter how much the carpet chewed

the bare skin of my knees, we kept moving faster and faster, meeting each other thrust for desperate, violent thrust.

The first rush of sweet, painful release rippled up my spine and with a gasp, I broke the kiss and threw my head back. I grabbed the edge of the bed and rode him harder, needing him as deep as my pussy could take him.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "Oh Jesus, Dani, you are so. Fucking. *Tight*."

One tremor after another surged through me, and I thought my spine would fall to pieces along with my mind. I came so hard, so violently, tears welled up in my eyes and my vision became nothing more than a blurry shower of white sparks.

When I could finally see again, I couldn't move. Couldn't convince my hips and legs to listen. My body was weighed down, held in place, and I thought I'd simply forgotten how to will myself to move. Then Connor moaned and shuddered, and I realized my paralysis came from him, from his arms wrapped tightly around me, holding me against him while he came.

His arms relaxed. I slumped over him, resting my forearms on his shoulders while I caught my breath.

"Wow, I needed that." He released a long breath.

"You're not the only one."

He smiled and raised his chin to kiss me. With the hunger sated for the time being, our lips moved gently and lazily, as did the trembling fingers running through my hair.

He looked over his shoulder, then back at me, laughing softly. "Well, we made it *to the bed*."

Shrugging, I smiled. "Close enough."

He smoothed my hair. "I'm really, really glad you're here."

"Me too." I kissed him gently.

Still half-dressed, my knees raw from the bite of the coarse hotel carpet and my body trembling from the power of my orgasm, I could think of nowhere else I'd rather be.

## ***Twenty Eight***

I dreamed. Of what, I don't know, but I know I dreamed because when I awoke, I remembered being... elsewhere.

My dream faded and I returned to a world illuminated only by the curtain-dulled glow of streetlights spilling in through the window. The room was silent except for the soft hiss of skin moving across skin, a sound underscored by the slow, rhythmic drawing and releasing of breath.

We were touching. Not just passively, no longer just holding each other in the stillness of sleep, but touching. Reaching. Feeling. We faced each other, lying on our sides, and though sleep still clouded my mind, my nerve endings were alive with awareness of him.

His lips moved lazily against mine and mine responded in kind. Warm skin drifted past my palm, and only when it stopped moving did I realize I'd been running my hand down his side. How long we'd been touching like this, I couldn't say, but my body was already restless with arousal.

Evidently, my body didn't need my mind's permission to respond to his touch. Or was he responding to me? Some contact must have been made in the beginning, but it didn't matter when or by whom. God only knew who'd started pulling the strings, but whatever the case, we'd come to life. Our bodies were simply drawn together, regardless of our minds. Just as breathing continued into unconsciousness, so too did our desire for each other. Touching wasn't enough, though, and so our bodies had roused our minds into

something resembling consciousness, and the path was clear to satisfying that desire.

Like mine, his movements were slow. Slurred. Languid. Weighed down by fatigue. Probably not fully awake, probably just as caught between here and a dream as I was. Sleep lapped at my consciousness like the tide on a beach, trying to pull me back, and judging by the way his movements ebbed and flowed, he too struggled to stay here.

Sleep beckoned, but still we sought each other, moving closer, moving together. Knowing, but not knowing. Dancing to unheard music, following steps I didn't know but had memorized nonetheless. His palm tracing the curve of my spine before his fingers tangled in my hair. My foot sliding up the back of his calf when I hooked my leg around him. Lips against my neck parting with the release of a hot breath.

Light and dark followed our lead, shapes playing on our bodies while we moved. Only abstract shapes existed in this half-dream: a sliver of light implying the curve of his pronounced cheekbone, the shadow of his hand just before he touched my face, a soft glint when I ran my fingers through his hair. The air around us was alive, the air between us even more so, and wherever we made contact, I half-expected to see electricity arc from my skin to his.

Movement. Shifting. Imbalance. A suggestion of panic flickered through my mind, but Connor's body was still against mine, guiding mine, over mine, and when the bed sheets gently caught my back and shoulders, I relaxed.

His hand covered my breast, drawing lazy circles around my nipple with his thumb. For an eternity, he just kissed me and teased my nipple, hypnotizing me with this gentle eroticism.

Eventually, his hand moved farther down, following the curve of my waist and the swell of my hip, then to my inner thigh. His fingertips teased my pussy, slipping in just enough to make my breath catch. They drew lazy spine-melting circles around my clit, and every fiber of my being focused on that delicious contact, on the maddening tension that built with every touch and filled the darkness with sparks of white light. All the energy crackling in the air around us converged, concentrating in the non-existent

space between Connor's fingertips and my clit.

It all released in a silent, shuddering orgasm, the sheer magnitude rendering me completely mute. I held onto him and simply gave in as everything inside me melted and shattered, collapsed and exploded.

When it passed and I opened my eyes, the dreamlike haze was gone. My climax had pulled me into full consciousness, and with consciousness came higher awareness. Specifically, awareness of my need for *him*.

I put my arms around him, but didn't have to tell him what I wanted. Either he read my mind or he wanted the same thing, because he moved on top of me. His hand ran down my leg and gently hooked behind my knee, pulling it up to his hip. I wrapped my legs around his waist as his shoulder dipped once, then came up, and with one hand, he guided himself to me.

His breath cooled the side of my face and his shoulders rose. Breath slipped out of my lungs at the exact same speed he slipped deeper inside me.

*My God, Connor, my body was made for yours.*

He moved just as slowly as he did when I was still half-dreaming, but it seemed deliberate now. He wasn't weighed down anymore, just holding back, as if moving in slow motion so he could really, truly feel me. Every now and again, he stopped. All the way inside me, as deep as he could go, he stopped. Only our lips and breath moved while we lost ourselves in a sensuous kiss. Then he'd start again, withdrawing slowly and resuming his smooth, gentle rhythm.

With a shiver, he pushed himself up and picked up speed, a faint ribbon of light rippling up and down his arm and shoulder with every stroke.

Faster now. Thrusting. *Needing*. The bed protested with half-hearted creaks, just loud enough to push the quiet back, a crescendoing intro making way for something more, something louder. Something that waited just beyond us, ready to break the near-silence.

A tremor drove him deeper, and a heartbeat later, he broke what was left of the silence. It wasn't a loud cry, just a long, whimpering moan that seemed to echo for miles as he came inside me.

He shuddered, gasped, then sank down to me, kissing



me gently. As the aftershocks of his orgasm subsided, we fell back into the lazy, languid touches that had roused me out of my sleep. Our hands moved less deliberately, with less precision, weighed down by sleepiness. After a while, I could barely keep my eyes open, and whenever I closed them, fatigue tried to take over.

Finally, Connor rolled onto his side and I did the same. He held me close and kissed the side of my neck, lacing his fingers between mine.

Warm and satisfied in his arms, I drifted off to sleep and dreamed of him.

## ***Twenty Nine***

When my eyes fluttered open the next morning, the room was an entirely different world. Sunlight poured in through the window, washing away the darkness, and the air was vibrant with the life of a new day. The crackling energy from last night was subdued, reduced to a lingering tingle beneath my skin.

In our sleep, Connor and I must have moved apart, because we faced each other now, lying on our sides with our fingers loosely intertwined between us. He was still asleep, his head slightly inclined and one side of his face obscured by the pillow. Stubble dusted his jaw, his hair was just disheveled enough to remind me of how many times I'd run my fingers through it hours ago, and I don't think I'd ever imagined a man could look quite so beautiful.

After almost a week of waking up without him, I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed him until now. Or at least, not until last night, when I just couldn't get enough of him. After only a few days apart, my desperate hunger for him had become unbearable.

He must have been on the same page. That, or he was just hornier than usual, but whatever the case, he'd been *relentless* last night. He'd hooked his hands under my shoulders, digging his fingers in while he'd fucked me harder, harder, harder, so hard it hurt, and still I'd begged him for more. And I still wanted more. Even while I was asleep.

I'd never been with someone I needed to be with all the time, someone for whom my sexual appetite was never

quite sated. Then again, I'd never been with someone I knew would be gone in a short time.

*Ah, that's it.*

Every night we spent apart was a night we couldn't get back, and we only had a few to gamble with in the first place. Last night we'd made up for lost time because we didn't have much time to lose.

Maybe this was a taste of what a long distance relationship could be like. Winding each other up via phone and text, followed by as much sex as we could possibly get during a short visit. Just enough to ease the worst of the hunger, not nearly enough to completely satisfy. Maybe we—

*No, no, no*, I told myself. There was no sense even entertaining that thought. When he moved away, that was it. This was over. I didn't want to let him go, but the alternative was something I couldn't entertain.

Connor stirred, murmuring softly. Stubble scuffed across the pillowcase and his brow furrowed, as if he was trying to decide whether to stay asleep or give in to consciousness. He drew and released a long, deep breath, and I thought he'd gone back to sleep, but when he reached the end of his exhalation, his eyes opened. He blinked a few times, then met my eyes and smiled.

"Hey, you," he said, touching my face.

"Hey." I kissed him lightly. *God, I missed you. You don't even know, Connor.*

He ran his fingers through my hair, blinking again as he woke up completely. "So, what do you want to do today?"

*Doesn't matter. I just want to be with you.* I shrugged. "You know the area better than I do."

"Hmm, well, I bought the tickets for Alcatraz when I got here, but we still have plenty of options." A mischievous grin lit up his face. "I did take the liberty of coming up with something to do tomorrow, though. I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Oh?"

He rolled over and picked his wallet up off the nightstand, then returned to his side. "Call me presumptuous, but I thought you might like this." He rifled through his wallet, then pulled out two strips of paper and held them up. "Would you be opposed to spending an

afternoon with the Giants?"

"You know me entirely too well." I plucked the tickets from his fingers. "Against the Mets, no less."

"They're not the best seats in the house, but it was the best I could do on short notice."

I smiled. "Nothing wrong with the cheap seats."

"So, I assume this pleases you?" He batted his eyes.

I kissed him gently. "Like you even have to ask."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to be displeased."

"Not a chance of that," I said.

"Good." He touched my face. "I've been looking forward to this all damned week."

"So have I." I gave him a toothy grin. "And I didn't even know there were baseball tickets involved."

"Oh, so now you're more interested in the game, I see how it is." Clicking his tongue, he shook his head and feigned offense. "I'm touched, Dani, I really am."

"Oh, shut up, you know what I meant," I laughed.

"Uh huh," he said. "You're just using me for baseball tickets."

"I didn't hear you complaining about how I was using you last night before I even knew there were tickets at stake."

He snatched the tickets out of my hand. "So if I throw these away, will you use me that way again?"

"Don't you dare." I lunged for the tickets, but he held them out of my reach. Just when he started to gloat that I couldn't reach them, I grabbed his wallet out of his other hand.

"Hey!"

"Turnabout's fair play," I said.

"Give that—" He reached for it, but I held it to my chest and rolled away.

"Give me the tickets, and you can have your wallet back."

He didn't give me the tickets, nor did he speak or reach for his wallet. Instead, he kissed the back of my shoulder, the scuff of his unshaven jaw against my skin making my breath catch.

"That's not going to work," I said.

"Isn't it?" he murmured, kissing his way up to my

neck. "Are you sure about that?"

I clutched his wallet tighter, knowing full well he was just trying to distract me enough to let go. But the way his tongue flicked across the base of my neck, and the warmth of his skin when he molded his body alongside mine, and the softness of his lips, and the coarseness of his jaw, and—

"Got it!" He grabbed it out of my hands. Laughing triumphantly, he rolled away, leaving my skin tingling and my body cool wherever he'd touched me.

I turned onto my side while he put the wallet and tickets on the nightstand. When he faced me again, he grinned, looked like he was about to speak, but I kissed him before he had the chance.

After only a second's hesitation, he returned it. He wrapped his arms around me and rolled me onto my back.

"You never get enough, do you?" He grinned just before he kissed me again.

"Do you?"

"Never." He glanced at the clock on the nightstand, then back at me. "And we've got a few hours before we need to be at the pier, so I don't see any reason to rush out of here this morning. Do you?"

"Not a one." I ran my fingers through his hair and wrapped my legs around his waist. "But I can think of quite a few reasons *not* to."

"What a coincidence," he whispered, exhaling as he pushed into me in one long, slow stroke. "So can I."

## ***Thirty***

Since parking spaces were few, far between, and expensive as hell down by Fisherman's Wharf, we took a bus into town, then rode one of the trolleys to the waterfront.

As expected on a Saturday morning during the summer, the wharf was packed with tourists. Vendors and panhandlers lined the crowded sidewalks, asking for money in exchange for cheap trinkets and good karma. The buzz of voices and hum of slow-moving traffic, punctuated by the barking of nearby sea lions, filled the salty air, and the cool breeze blowing in off the bay kept the summer sun from getting unbearably hot. In fact, I was glad I'd brought a light jacket, especially since we'd be out on a boat in a few hours when we went to Alcatraz.

After an early lunch at a crowded outdoor café, we wandered down by the piers to watch the sea lions playing in the waves.

"So, this is San Francisco." I looked up at the skyline. "Seems like a nice place to live."

He nodded. "Yeah, I like it." The silence that fell inched dangerously close to another conversation about how little time we had left, so I quickly changed the subject.

"Where's the university?" I asked.

"It's a ways south of here," he said. "Closer to Palo Alto, actually."

"You're not going to live down there?"

He shook his head. "I like this city. Figured it'll be worth the commute." Then he laughed. "We'll see, though. By the time my lease is up, I might be tired of driving thirty miles each way every single day."

"I don't envy you for the amount of gas you'll be going through," I said. "Going to trade in the Jeep for a Malibu?"

He shot me a good-natured glare, then put his arm around my waist and pulled me closer to him. "I could always make you walk back to the hotel, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "Same empty threat you used last night."

Kissing my cheek, he said, "Yeah, but that was before I'd finally gotten you into bed. Now that I have it all out of my system—"

"Out of your system?" I laughed, pulling free from his grasp. "Does that mean you don't want any more while I'm here?"

"I didn't say that," he said, chuckling.

Folding my arms across my chest, I tried to look serious. "So you won't make me walk back to the hotel?"

He put his hands on my hips and leaned in to kiss my neck. "Like you even have to ask."

Before I could come back with a witty retort, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. "What the hell?" I muttered.

"What's wrong?" He cocked his head.

"Phone." I pulled it out and groaned when the caller ID showed Matt's name. I glanced at Connor. "Mind if I take this?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

I smiled, then flipped my phone open. "Hey."

"Hey," Matt said tentatively. "Are you, um, are you busy?"

Glancing at Connor, I smiled. "Yeah, kind of."

"Oh. Um. Look, could you call me later?" Matt hesitated. "I'd like to talk. About, um. Things."

"Things? What things?" I laced my fingers between Connor's.

"Well, us, I guess."

I barely stopped myself from groaning again. "Need I remind you that 'us' doesn't exist anymore?"

Connor's eyebrows jumped. I made an exasperated gesture and he laughed softly.

"Dani, can we at least talk?" Matt said.

"There isn't much to talk about, Matt. In fact, there really isn't anything to talk about." I freed my hand from

Connor's and slipped it around his waist. He leaned in and kissed the side of my neck.

"Look, I've been doing some thinking." Matt paused. "I made a mistake." So it wasn't tentativeness. It was repentance.

"It's in the past," I said.

"I know it is, but I, you know, maybe we could..." He trailed off, searching for the words while Connor searched for that sweet spot just behind my ear.

"Matt, don't," I said. "It's—"

"Dani, just hear me out."

I sucked in a breath, partly from aggravation with Matt and partly because Connor's lips had found the spot they were looking for.

Though there was a time when I would eagerly have taken Matt back, that time had long since passed. The man I wanted would be leaving soon, but that wasn't a good enough reason to go back to the man I used to want.

"Sorry, Matt," I said. "It's over, we're done, I can't."

"You can't, or you won't?" The hint of a snarl killed any sympathy I might have had for him.

"Either or. End result is the same."

Connor lifted his head and we exchanged smiles. I added, "That, and I'm with someone else now."

"You're—" Matt paused. "You're with someone else? Already?"

"Already?" I scoffed. "This from someone who already had a replacement moved into the house."

"That was," he paused. "That was...different." ."

I laughed. "Different *how*? No, never mind, I don't want to know. Listen, my boyfriend and I are on vacation, so—"

"On vacation? What the hell? You're not wasting any time, are you?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but yes, we're on vacation. Together. And I'm going now. Goodbye, Matt." With that, I snapped my phone shut.

Connor kissed my neck again, murmuring, "So is this the part where I get to gloat because I got the girl?"

"No," I said. "This is the part where you stop teasing the girl and kiss her."



"That I can do." He put his arms around me and as soon as he kissed me, my phone call was forgotten. His lightly stubbled chin brushed mine, raising more goose bumps than the cool wind, and for a long moment, all the hustle and bustle of the wharf disappeared.

When he broke the kiss, he ran his fingers through my hair. "Now can I gloat because I got the girl?"

I laughed. "Connor Graham, you are incorrigible."

"Damn right I am. Well, fine, if I can't gloat, then I'll just have to..." He kissed me again, this time even more passionately, pulling the breath right out of my lungs and almost knocking my knees out from under me.

"Okay, you can gloat all you want now." I panted against his lips. "As long as you kiss me like that again."

He winked, then glanced at his watch. "Actually, it's almost one. We'd better get down to the dock or we're going to miss the boat."

"Tease."

"I'll make it up to you tonight, I promise." He kissed me lightly. "Let's go."

Hand in hand, we followed The Embarcadero from Fisherman's Wharf to Pier 33, where a thick crowd gathered in front of the sign for Alcatraz tours. Connor handed our tickets over and we were ushered through the gate where a smaller crowd waited for the next boat.

Once we were aboard, Connor stood behind me, hands on the railing beside mine. With any other man, it might have been claustrophobic, but I liked being close to him like this and not just because his body shielded mine from the crisp bay wind. As long as he was touching me, then he was still here. He was still—

*Stop it, Dani. Quit obsessing. Enjoy him while he is still here.*

He reached up and brushed some wind-whipped hair out of my face, then kissed my cheek.

"So have you ever done this tour?" I asked.

"A few times."

"You don't mind going through it again?"

"Not at all." He nuzzled the side of my neck. "It's been a while, and this tour never gets old."

"Well, good, I wouldn't want you getting bored." I

glanced over my shoulder and smiled at him.

He wrapped his arms around my waist. "I don't think I could ever get bored with you around, Dani."

I laughed. "You never know."

Kissing my cheek again, he said, "I highly, highly doubt it."

The boat pulled up alongside a small dock. Once it was tied and the ramp lowered, Connor and I followed the other tourists to shore and up the path to the penitentiary. Inside, Connor's fingers loosely laced between mine while we wandered through the cellblocks and courtyards.

The tour included headphones and a cassette tape that explained the history of the island prison. With the tapes playing, we didn't speak, but everywhere we went, he reminded me he was there. Fingers running up and down my spine while the narrator told the story of a famed escape attempt. A stolen kiss when we wandered past the old water tower. A hand on the small of my back while we walked, the same hand that discreetly gave my ass a gentle squeeze on the way up the ramp to the boat after the tour was over.

On the way back to the city, leaving Alcatraz behind us, I leaned over the bow and looked out at the panoramic skyline. Connor put his arms around my waist, and though his touch made my heart flutter, something sank in my gut as I watched the city draw nearer.

So this would be his new home. This was where he'd be in a few weeks while I stayed in Seattle.

A few months down the line, when I thought about him and wondered what he was doing or who he was with, this was where he would be. Here, amidst these hills and skyscrapers, or at the university at the other end of the bay. Maybe with someone who was already here, or someone who hadn't yet arrived.

He would be here.

I'd never thought it was possible to be jealous of a city, but there it was. I wanted him. San Francisco would have him.

## ***Thirty One***

"I can't say I've met too many women who swoon over baseball tickets," Connor said.

I looked over my shoulder as we climbed to our seats in the nosebleed section. "You also don't know too many women who spend all day getting dirty and sweaty."

"Ah, but now I've seen the light."

"And the light was a sweaty, disheveled tomboy?" I laughed.

"Damn right," he said. "Here, this is our row." We squeezed past a few people, found our seats, and sat down to watch the game.

Connor looked around. "I haven't been to this stadium before. Last game I went to down here was at Candlestick Park."

"That's just a football stadium now, isn't it?"

He nodded. "But my dad took my sister and me to a game when we were in town on vacation years ago."

"I never made it to a game there. My uncle was there during that earthquake in 1989, though."

Connor's eyebrows jumped. "He managed to swing World Series tickets? Lucky bastard."

I laughed. "Well, he thought so, at least until the ground moved."

"I can imagine." He chuckled. "Though for World Series seats, I might just be willing to sit through an earthquake."

"Earthquake or not, I'd sell my damned soul for those tickets."

"Wait," he said. "if your soul is already damned, wouldn't selling it be a bit redundant?"

I shot him a playful glare. "Brat."

"What? I'm just saying." He shrugged, feigning innocence.

I elbowed him, trying not to laugh. "Well then maybe I'll sell yours instead."

"Please. You'd be lucky to get minor league tickets for that thing," he laughed. "But you're welcome to try." We exchanged playful glances.

The announcer's voice boomed through the stadium, asking the fans to stand for the National Anthem. After the anthem was sung, we returned to our seats. Connor draped his arm around my shoulders and we settled in to watch the game.

Though we focused on the game going on far below us, he was never any further from my mind than he was my body, and he made sure of that. His fingers ran up and down the side of my arm, occasionally drifting low enough to brush bare skin before retreating to my sleeve.

Two could play at that game, however. I rested my hand on his leg. Every now and then, I trailed my thumb along the hem of his shorts, just grazing his skin, those brief, light touches making him fidget. When I turned to say something to him and he leaned in to better hear me, I flicked my tongue just below his ear, grinning when he shivered.

The game went on, occupying half of my attention, if that. Now and again, we'd turn to each other for a quick kiss or a comment about the score, the players, or what he had in mind for me when we got back to the hotel. By the seventh inning stretch, the Giants were losing miserably, but I didn't care. Neither the Mets nor the Giants were my team anyway, and regardless of the score, I was having the time of my life.

Before I knew it, it was the bottom of the eighth. To avoid traffic, we left before the ninth inning. As much as I'd enjoyed the game, I was only mildly disappointed to be leaving. After all, I was still with Connor, so I couldn't complain.

Outside the stadium, we caught a cab and had the

driver take us to Fisherman's Wharf. A restaurant there had caught our eye the previous morning, and we'd left the game just in time to grab an early dinner.

The restaurant offered an eclectic mix of local seafood and various European cuisine, which was exactly what the doctor ordered after a day of stadium food. As soon as we walked through the door, pungent garlic erased the smell of hot dogs and roasted peanuts. The wine list was as varied as the menu, and customers ranged from families in shorts and T-shirts to couples in shirts and slacks. It was the kind of low-key place that catered to tourists like us, but was quiet and high-end enough to beckon the locals through the doors.

The place sat right at the water's edge, the sound of the tide lapping at the rocks adding a gentle percussion to the soft classical music playing in the background. The view of the bay was panoramic, and off to the west, the Golden Gate Bridge gleamed red in the late afternoon sun.

This was the perfect place to close out our day. And the weekend, for that matter. Tomorrow morning, we'd be on a plane bound for Seattle, and this was just the kind of quiet, leisurely atmosphere that could slow time down for a couple of hours.

"Enjoy the game?" he asked after the waitress had taken our order.

"Of course I did," I said. "Even if *someone* kept trying to distract me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Trying?"

"Okay, even if someone kept distracting me."

He laid his hand over mine on the table and lowered his voice. "Something tells me you enjoyed the distractions as much as the game."

"I didn't hear you complaining about it, either." I ran my thumb alongside his hand.

"No, absolutely not." He clasped my hand in both of his and lifted my fingers to his lips. "But when we get back to our room, you can make it up to me."

"Or you could make it up to me."

He grinned. "We could always meet in the middle."

"Compromise. I like that."

A few minutes later, our food arrived, and we continued chatting and bantering while we ate. About the

time we'd finished eating, the restaurant was starting to get crowded, so we opted for a quick exit rather than taking up a table while other people were waiting.

It was still early and we weren't quite ready to call it a night, so we wandered down The Embarcadero in search of the perfect place to watch the sun go down over the bay.

The sidewalks were still thickly packed with tourists, but we just wove our way through them, lost in our own conversation. We didn't raise our voices above the noise around us. Everything else—voices, cars, sea lions, waves hitting pylons—disappeared into the background and all I could hear was Connor. Hand in hand we walked together like a couple who had no reason to believe we'd ever walk alone again.

A few blocks away from the restaurant, we found a dock that was mostly deserted, and there we stopped.

The sun inched closer to the water, staining the sky with varying shades of purple and orange. In the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge etched a series of swooping curves and rigid lines just above the horizon. Though it was summertime, the wind off the bay was cool, giving the air just enough of a chill to create the perfect excuse for Connor to put his arms around my waist. Standing behind me, he kissed my cheek while we watched the day fade into the west.

*"The largest fire ever known, occurs each afternoon—"* he whispered against the side of my neck. *"Discovered is without surprise, proceeds without concern, consumes and no report to men, an Occidental Town, rebuilt another morning, to be burned down again."*

"And which poet is that?"

"Dickinson," he murmured. "Not my favorite poet, but I always liked that particular poem." As the sun kissed the water, Connor nuzzled my neck. "I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

He gently turned me around to face him. "I've been looking forward to it all week." Tucking a windswept lock of hair behind my ear, he added, "I just can't believe you finally got here."

I smiled. "It was only a week."

"Not even that long," he said. "But I've still been going out of my mind."

"Me too." Just needing to touch him, I put my hands on his chest. "I'm here now, though."

He touched my face and for a moment, just looked at me. Then, without a word, his fingers moved into my hair and he leaned in to kiss me. My hands slid around his neck and I returned his gentle kiss.

There was nothing but tenderness in the way our lips moved together. We weren't trying to turn each other on, though we did. We weren't suggesting more to come, though it would. For now, we simply were.

I don't know how much time passed, but when our eyes met again, the sun had set and darkness had fallen.

The pad of his thumb across my cheekbone.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too."

And he kissed me again.

## ***Thirty Two***

Like the first time we crossed this threshold together, we stumbled on our way into the hotel room, but this time we didn't fall. Shoes came off and were kicked safely out of the way. His shirt landed on top of mine at our feet. Fingers tangled in hair and breath mingled between lips.

There was urgency in every move we made to get from clothing to skin, but not our usual hungry desperation. This went above and beyond that. It wasn't a pursuit of physical release, just the need to simply get as close to each other as possible.

Half-dressed, we sank together onto the bed. Lying on his back with me on top, Connor tried to unfasten my bra. Couldn't. Tried again. Still couldn't. I reached back to do it, but it was too complicated for me too. That, and it meant taking my hands off him. Though it annoyed me, this strip of fabric dividing us, it bothered me less than even a second without his skin beneath my hands.

Instead, I leaned down and kissed him again. How long we held each other like that, simply breathing and tasting each other, I couldn't say. Time just didn't matter.

He broke the kiss and looked up at me, touching my face just as he had after we'd kissed away the sunset. His eyes reminded me of the moment they met mine right after he'd taken my blindfold off. When I'd realized, without a doubt, that I was in love with him.

Looking at him now, I needed to be closer to him. Without a word, we moved apart to get the last of our



clothes off. His jeans thumped onto the floor in a heap, followed by mine, and a second later, my bra landed on top.

When I rejoined him on the bed, he tried to roll me onto my back, but I resisted, pushing him back instead. I sat over him and he pressed his cock against me. His breath caught when I pushed back.

He tangled his fingers in my hair when I kissed his neck. Beside my lips, his Adam's apple bobbed slightly and a nearly inaudible moan vibrated against my mouth.

He exhaled hard and ran his fingers through my hair while I trailed light kisses down his neck and over his collarbone. Gently holding his nipple in my teeth, I alternated between lightly teasing with my tongue and sucking just hard enough to make him squirm.

Continuing down his chest, I taunted his senses with light kisses, flicks of my tongue, occasionally blowing cool air on damp skin. Every time his muscles quivered or his breathing changed, I wanted him that much more. Time and again we'd made love, we'd fucked, we'd tasted each other, we'd breathed each other, and I just couldn't get enough.

Closing my lips around his cock, I couldn't decide if the moan I felt was his or mine. Possibly both. Didn't matter. Just wanted him. I teased him with a gentle hand and a slow mouth, seeking only to turn him on, not to make him come just yet. The salt of his skin and the pulsing against my tongue gave me goose bumps just like it always did. Fingers in my hair and moans from his lips told me every time I did something right, and the more aroused he was, the more aroused I became.

Every sound, every tremor, every taste of his skin drove me on. The more I gave him, the more he gave back in the form of moans and tremors. My jaw ached, but it was nothing compared to the other ache that intensified as I sent him closer. Hearing and feeling him like this aroused me so much my eyes watered. The further he went out of his mind, the more I needed him. Much more of this and I'd come before he did.

His hand tightened in my hair. At first, I thought he was simply responding to what I was doing, but the moan that followed was as much a plea as a sound of arousal.

When I looked up at him, he met my eyes, and though he didn't speak, I knew what he wanted.

Pushing myself up on shaking arms, I came up to kiss him. He met me halfway, nearly knocking me off balance with the tender desperation in his kiss and the unsteadiness in his grasp.

My equilibrium shifted and Connor guided me onto my back. As soon as my skin touched the bedcovers, he moved down, gently pushing my thighs apart. Before his lips even touched my pussy, the blanket was bunched in my clawing fingers, and as soon as his tongue met my clit, breathing was nearly impossible.

His mouth moved just as slowly as our bodies had since we'd come through the door. With languid, restrained movements, his tongue found that sweet spot, that perfect combination of circles and flutters. So slow, so gentle, that even while the tension built inside me, while the delicious electricity rose until it was on the verge of way too much, my orgasm caught me by surprise.

One heartbeat, I was holding my breath.

The next, I was crying out his name and surrendering to blissful delirium.

Before I'd even returned to this side of sanity, Connor was over me. Over me, against me, inside me. The perfect percussion of his cock against my G-spot and his body against my clit kept my orgasm from tapering completely. It peaked and fell, but didn't die. Instead, it lingered as a steady pulse just beneath the surface, lying dormant yet still intensifying with every deep, powerful thrust.

I rolled my hips in time with his, and our bodies fell into a perfect rhythm, moving together just as they had the first time and every time thereafter. We found each other's mouths, but kissing was nearly impossible. Our lips touched, but neither moved except to take and release breath, panting against each other's mouths.

Connor shuddered. Tightened his grasp on my shoulders. Released a breath across my chin. Thrust deeper, harder.

"Oh God, Dani," he moaned. "Oh God, I'm so..." Another shiver drove him deeper, drove a whimper from my lips.

The dormant remnants of my last orgasm flared to life, the tension inside me building to that delicious breaking point, ready, on the edge, gunpowder awaiting a spark.

I pulled in a breath. As if I'd breathed him right to my lips, Connor kissed me. Deeply, desperately, perfectly.

Spark touched powder.

I held his shoulders for dear life.

And I saw stars.

## ***Thirty Three***

Breathless and sweating, we collapsed together. Aftershocks from my second orgasm still rippled through me, and Connor's hand trembled when he ran his fingers through my hair. For the longest time, we simply held each other in silence.

This blissful afterglow seemed a fitting end to a day like today. It seemed a fitting end to this entire weekend. But I was growing to hate these fitting ends because they all conspired to push us closer to the one thing I kept fighting to ignore: August. Like the days growing shorter as summer moved into fall, every day we spent together seemed shorter than the last.

I tried to push it out of my mind. Lying with him like this was entirely too perfect to spoil with thoughts of the end. That could be dwelled upon when its time came. For now, I indulged in enjoying all the minute things: The warmth of his body beneath the covers with mine. The slow, even rhythm of his breathing. The heady, lingering scent of sex.

I turned on my side and faced him. "I don't know what it is you do with your tongue," I slurred. "but it's absolutely amazing."

He smiled and shifted onto his side, facing me. "It's nothing exotic. Just have to find the right letter."

"Letter?" I raised my eyebrows. "What do—" I thought about the ever-changing patterns he drew with the tip of his tongue. Lines, curves, swirls. Letters. I laughed. "Ever the linguist, aren't you?"

"Ever the *cunning* linguist." He chuckled.

"Isn't that *Master* cunning linguist, now?"

"So it is." He kissed me lightly. "And don't you forget it."

"Keep doing what you do with your tongue," I said. "and I won't, don't worry."

"Then I will. Just to keep you from forgetting, of course." He smiled and stroked my hair. "Come on, you've never heard of that?"

"I can't say I have." *Can't say I've been with someone willing to put forth the effort.* "But I like it."

Trailing his fingertips down my upper arm, he said, "So I noticed."

"So just what is my letter?"

He grinned. "Depends on the night. Some nights, you're a 'K' or an 'M'. Sometimes you're an 'E'."

I ran my fingers across his chest. "And tonight?"

"Tonight, you were a 'G'," he said. "But I usually go through the alphabet at least once, just to drive you crazy."

"It works," I laughed. "Jesus, does it ever. I don't suppose you know the Chinese alphabet, do you?"

"Afraid not," he said. "But if I wanted to learn it, would you let me practice on you?"

I leaned forward and kissed him. "As if you need to ask."

"Maybe I'll have to sign up for a Chinese class, then." We both laughed, but the humor quickly faded and we avoided each other's eyes.

There it was again. Unspoken, but unavoidable. Just a playful comment about a hypothetical class brought it right to the surface. Even if he did want to take a Chinese class, it didn't make a whit of difference as far as we were concerned because we were running out of time.

Some unspoken thought pulled his eyebrows together and tightened his lips into a thin line. His Adam's apple bobbed and he watched his fingers play with a lock of my hair.

I touched his face, which drew his attention to my eyes. There was something going on inside that mind of his, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"You're thinking something." Though I barely

whispered, my voice seemed to echo between the four walls of the room that was still ours for a few precious hours.

He smiled half-heartedly. "Can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"Guess not." Knowing there really was something on his mind did nothing to settle uneasy nerves.

Connor took a breath and propped himself up on one elbow. "Let me ask you something."

I swallowed. "Okay." My stomach fluttered. I had no idea where this conversation was going.

He bit his lip, and the longer he hesitated, the more nervous I became. Then I realized his smile wasn't half-hearted at all. It was nervous. Shy, even.

Taking another breath, he said, "Would you consider coming to California with me?"

"Connor, I *am* in California with you." I knew full well what he meant, but the lighthearted joke gave me a chance to laugh, which kept me breathing.

He chuckled, his cheeks coloring a little. "Right, right." When he cleared his throat, his expression turned more serious. He wetted his lips. "I mean, would you consider moving down here with me?"

So much for breathing. "Are you," I paused. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. I'm completely serious."

"Connor..." I couldn't form the words, because there were no words to form. I couldn't give him an answer I didn't have.

He touched my face, stroking my cheekbone with his thumb. "It wouldn't exactly be anything glamorous. I'm not a wealthy man, and the life of a grad student is nothing if not an exercise in frugality. It would be five years of a lot of work and not a lot of money, but..." Pausing, he ran his fingers through my hair. "...I would love it if you came with me."

*Oh, sweet temptation, thy name is California.*

Blood pounded in my ears. My heart screamed yes, but my damned rational mind elbowed its way in and poured cold reality over me. This was all too familiar, an invitation to go down a road I'd walked before and vowed never to walk again.

But this was Connor, not Matt.

This was different.

Wasn't it?

His thumb brushed the side of my face, bringing me out of my thoughts.

Swallowing hard, I said, "Do you need an answer right away?"

He shook his head. "No, no, of course not." The pad of his thumb moved across my cheekbone. "It's not a small decision, I wouldn't rush you."

*You won't, but our circumstances might.* "Thank you," was all I could say.

He touched my face. "Hey."

I looked at him and he kissed me gently.

"You okay?" he whispered.

Nodding slowly, I sighed. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

Our eyes met, and I was sure he saw right through me. There was no sense pretending nothing was on my mind, especially not when I knew it was on his mind as well.

I took a breath. "I guess we're getting down to the wire now."

He clasped his hand in mine. "We still have time."

"Not a lot."

"No, not a lot." He was barely whispering. "But it's what we have. And quite honestly, I'd rather have a little bit of time together than none at all."

At that, I managed a smile. "Good point."

He ran his thumb back and forth along the side of my hand. "I do wish we had more time, though."

"I know," I said. "But, it is what it is."

"Not much we can do about it," he said. "Still, that doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't." *And it makes your offer so, so tempting.* "I guess the only thing we can do is just enjoy it. We'll have plenty of time to feel bad about it and mourn it later, but I'd rather spend the time we have enjoying it."

He smiled. "You're absolutely right. So I think—" he rolled me onto my back and bent to kiss my neck. "—we should get back to that whole 'enjoying it' part."

## ***Thirty Four***

On my way to work on Tuesday morning, I called Mary.

"Hey, you," she said. "How was your trip?"

"It was fun." I couldn't even try to inject enthusiasm into my voice.

"You sure about that?" she asked. "You sound upset."

"It was fun, it really was. Time of my life, believe me. It's just..." I let out of a breath.

"Just, what?"

"He—" I hesitated.

"Come on, Dani, out with it."

Tapping my thumbs on the steering wheel, I took a breath and said, "He wants me to move to California with him."

Mary released a cough of startled laughter. "Oh, isn't that just déjà vu."

"Exactly," I said.

"So, are you going?"

"I haven't given him an answer yet."

She paused. "That wasn't what I asked. Are you going to go with him?"

"I don't know if I should."

"I thought you didn't like Seattle."

"It's growing on me," I said. "But that's beside the point. If I move anywhere, I want to go back to Cheyenne."

"But what about Connor?"

I sighed. "Mary, I can't do that again."



"This isn't the same thing. You'd be moving with Connor, not that asshole you used to call a boyfriend. Two different men, two—"

"Two very similar scenarios."

"I know, I know, on paper, they look the same," she said. "But from everything you've said about Connor, he's nothing like Matt."

"I didn't think Matt was like Matt until I got out here."

"Dan," she said. "There comes a point where you need to stop comparing Connor to Matt. I mean, yeah, there's some similarities between how things have played out with them, but how many similarities are there between *them*?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, all the crap Matt used to pull on you," she said. "How much of that has Connor pulled?"

"Well, none, but—"

"Because Connor *isn't* Matt, sweetie," she said. "You might be focusing too hard on the big picture, and you're forgetting the small picture. Don't use Matt to measure Connor, use Connor to measure Connor."

"Even still," I said, tapping my thumbs on the wheel. "I can't just pick up my life and move again. I mean, what about Jester and Calypso?"

"And you would choose them over a man?"

"Mary, they're like my kids." I sighed. "I can't sell them."

"But how much are you willing to give up to keep them?"

"I'm staying in Seattle, aren't I?"

"Let me ask you this, then," she said. "If Matt didn't exist, and you'd gone to Seattle for some other reason, and you had the money to move the horses, would you go with Connor?"

I blew out a breath. "I don't know. I just don't."

"He sounds like a great guy," she said. "I mean, from what you've told me, I'm willing to forgive Matt for dragging you all the way out there simply because it led you to Connor."

Chewing my lip, I didn't know what to say.

"Don't let Matt fuck up this relationship, Dan," she said. "And don't hide behind Jester and Calypso if what you

really want is to be with him."

"But even if I do want to go, what do I do with them?"

"Well," she said, her voice gentle. "You may have to make some hard decisions. I know they mean a lot to you, sweetie, but you've put your life on hold for them as much as you did for Matt. Sooner or later, you're going to have to put yourself first."

"I am putting myself first," I said. "By not giving up my horses and not following him to San Francisco."

"Even though what you want is to do just that?"

"So you're a mind reader now?"

"Dan, I know you," she said. "And I know that if you were doing this because of the horses, or because you didn't want a repeat of Matt, you would have already told him no."

I said nothing.

Her voice softer, she said, "Just give it some thought. Don't do something impulsive, even if that something is doing nothing."

"I won't." I pulled up next to the barn and shifted into park. "I'm at work, so I should let you go."

"Okay, take care," she said. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

After I hung up, I turned off the engine and went into the barn. Just my luck, Susan was coming out of the tack room as I was going in.

"Hey," she said. "How was your trip?"

"It was fun." I smiled, and as soon as I did, I knew she saw right through me.

Furrowing her brow, she folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the doorway. "I'm assuming there's a 'but'?"

"Yeah, there is."

"Okay," she said. "So, what happened?"

"He asked me to go to San Francisco with him," I said.

"As in, permanently."

She blinked. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"Are you going?"

"I, well—I haven't given him an answer, but..." I trailed off, trying to force my conversation with my sister to the back of my mind. Running a hand through my hair, I

said, "I don't think I should."

"You—what?" She shook her head. "Dani, are—"

"I've only known him for a few months, Suze," I said.

"Never mind the fact that I can't afford to move Jester and Calypso, I can't just pick up my life to follow someone I barely know." *Someone I barely know. As if Connor qualifies.*

"But, you're happy with him, aren't you?"

"For the moment, yes."

She shifted her weight, eyeing me. "Need I remind you of the fact that you're miserable here?"

"I don't mind it here," I said with a shrug.

"Bullshit, you don't." She cocked her head. "You mean to tell me that if you could afford to move Calypso and Jester, you wouldn't be on your way back to Cheyenne?"

"That doesn't mean I hate it here." I avoided her eyes. "Cheyenne is my hometown. If I could go back, I would."

"So you're not attached to this place."

"Doesn't mean I'm miserable."

"Except you *are* miserable" she said. "Come on, Dani, up until the day you met Connor, you wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of Seattle."

"I wanted to go back to Cheyenne."

"Going back to Cheyenne and getting the hell out of Seattle are mutually inclusive, sweetheart," she said with a grin. "Now, seriously. Ever since you hooked up with him, you haven't said two words about Wyoming."

I bit my lip. She had a point.

"And let's face it," she went on. "Even with my fabulous company, you hate this job."

I laughed. "I like this job. I just hate our boss."

"Right, well, there isn't much you can do about him," she said. "He comes with the territory. But you'd be perfectly happy working at another farm, wouldn't you?"

Sighing, I nodded. "Yeah. I would."

"Especially if that farm was in Northern California."

I rubbed the back of my neck and sighed. "It's just not that simple. I could go to work for another farm up here, trailer Jester and Calypso to that barn, and be done with it. Moving them to another state? I broke the bank moving them here in the first place."

"Would you consider selling them?"

"Not a chance," I said quickly, almost snapping at her. "I know you don't get as attached to them as I do, but no. No way. Not those two."

"You'd give up a man like Connor for your horses?"

"I'm not willing to gamble with them," I said. "I'm not willing to sell them and hope to God things work out with Connor. What if they don't? Then I don't have him or the horses."

"Hon, I know him," she said. "If any man on this planet is worth that risk, it's Connor."

"And what if things don't pan out with him?" I paused, biting my lip. "He was with his ex longer than I was with mine. Now he's over her and ready to move me to another state to be with him?"

Susan shrugged. "So he got over her."

"Right. So what happens if he decides to leave me like he did her? And, Jesus, look how fast he got over her and moved on to me. I've seen how fast he can get over a woman after five years. Who's to say he won't turn around and do the same to me before the ink is dry on my address change form?"

Susan swallowed, then nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess I can understand that. But I don't think he'd do that to you."

"Did you think he'd do it to Olivia? You thought she left him, remember?"

She nodded again. "I know. And it did catch me by surprise." She was quiet for a long moment. Then she shook her head and sighed. "Maybe you're right. I've never thought of him as having a revolving door, but..." She let out a breath. "I don't know what to tell you, Dani, I'm just sorry things are working out this way."

I chewed the inside of my cheek and avoided her eyes. "So am I."

## ***Thirty Five***

Walking into Connor's apartment, I tried to ignore the cardboard boxes in the corner. There were a few last time I was here, before he left for California. A few more now. There would be more tomorrow.

He wasn't moving for a few weeks yet, and I wished that just this once, he'd put something off until the last minute. Never a procrastinator, he was well ahead of the game. Every time I came through this door, the boxes were piled a little higher, filling with pieces of his world in preparation for leaving mine.

"Drink?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder on the way into the kitchen.

"Whatever you're having," I said quietly.

He pulled a pair of beer bottles out of the refrigerator, popped them open, and handed one to me. I took a long drink and didn't taste a thing. I was vaguely aware of cold liquid on my tongue, but with the exception of the faint scent of cardboard, I was numb to both taste and smell.

"You okay?" he asked.

I rolled another sip of beer around in my mouth, searching for the taste. It may as well have been brewed from corrugated cardboard.

"Dani?"

I sighed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He inclined his head, lifting his eyebrows inquisitively. "You sure?"

I nodded. Without even realizing what I was doing, I shifted my eyes toward the stack of boxes and packing

material in the corner. His beer bottle made a hollow sound when he set it on the counter. Shoes tapped on the linoleum, and I closed my eyes when he came closer. I knew his touch was coming, knew he was close by, but tears still threatened when his hand landed gently on my hip.

With two fingers, he lifted my chin, and I opened my eyes, blinking away the tears.

"This is about my leaving, isn't it?" he whispered.

As much as I could with his hand still under my chin, I nodded.

He took a deep breath and subtly squared his shoulders, like a man bracing for fist to the chest. In a soft voice, he said, "Have you given any thought to coming with me?"

It was my turn to take a deep breath. I dropped my gaze. "Connor, I can't."

He said nothing. I wasn't sure if he was waiting for me to say more or if there was nothing else to say, but I needed to fill the silence.

"I'm sorry. I..." So much for filling the silence.

"Would I be wasting my time if I tried to talk you into it?" There was just enough of a lilt in his voice to suggest he was trying to add some nervous humor.

I met his eyes, managing a half-hearted smile. "It's not that I don't want to, there's just..." *Oh hell, might as well be honest.* "You know why I came to Seattle in the first place, right?"

He nodded.

Avoiding his eyes, I said, "I can't do that again, Connor. I completely uprooted my life to go with him, and..." I sighed. "Well, you know that story."

"I know." He ran his fingers through my hair. "And I can't decide if I'm glad he brought you out here so I'd eventually meet you, or if I want to kick his ass for giving you a reason to doubt me."

I tried to laugh, but couldn't. "It's not that I doubt you. I don't think you'd be like that. It's just..." *This feels different, but how can I possibly know? And could you get over me as fast as you got over Olivia?*

He took and released a breath. "You didn't think he would do it either?"

I swallowed. Then nodded. "After four years, I thought I knew him. Obviously I didn't. I'm sorry, Connor, I am. It's just, I—"

"I understand," he whispered, running his fingers through my hair. "I really do." He smiled, if only half-heartedly. "Can't blame a guy for trying, can you?"

I forced a smile. "No, I definitely can't. And even with his sorry ass out of the picture, there's my horses. It would cost a small fortune to move them that far, and I just can't afford to do it again." I chewed my lip, then quickly added, "And I can't sell them."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I know how much they mean to you." He kissed me gently. Then he let out a long breath and dropped his gaze. Barely whispering, he said, "As much as I don't want to let this go, we can't do this as a long distance thing."

My heart sank a little deeper, even though I knew he was right.

He touched my face. "You have your commitments up here. I'm going to be up to my ass in school down there. We'd be lucky to get each other on the phone. And all the flying back and forth..." Sighing, he kissed my forehead and tenderly brushed his thumb across my cheekbone. "Those visits would be worth it, but we'd both be miserable the other ninety-five percent of the time."

"I know," I whispered. "And we knew this was coming from the beginning."

"I know we did." He brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "I guess I didn't realize we'd get..." He trailed off for a moment. "That we'd be like this."

"So what do we do between now and then?"

"The same thing we've been doing," he said. "We spend the next few weeks enjoying this as much as we can. Then we go our separate ways."

"Do you think it'll be that easy?"

"I never said it was easy," he said softly. "But, it's all we've got."

"True."

He swallowed hard, then smiled, and this time his eyes backed it up. "And if you find yourself in the Bay Area sometime, look me up."

I smiled in spite of the lump in my throat. "Likewise, whenever you come up here."

"You know I will." His hand slid around to the back of my neck. "But, for the time being, we're both here..." He grinned.

"And we've got a whole night all to ourselves." I put my arms around him. "We should think of something to do with it."

"I think I know *exactly* what we can do with it..."



## ***Thirty Six***

"Could you hand me that stack of newspapers?"

I picked up a stack and leaned over a couple of boxes to give it to Connor.

"Thanks." He set it on the counter and continued wrapping a set of wine glasses. His kitchen was a mess of cardboard, newspaper, and bubble wrap. For the last couple of hours, we'd worked our way through cupboards, packing away dishes, utensils, pots, pans. All the things he'd need in San Francisco. Evan was letting him use his stuff between now and the move, so Connor had time to get ahead of the game and pack everything well in advance.

Though we kept the conversation light, an odd feeling coiled itself in my gut. Not nervousness, per se. Just... restlessness. Like anticipation of something that needed to happen or was about to happen. Something I didn't want to happen, but at the same time, wanted to be over.

I knew what it was, but ignored it. So did he. We chatted like we had all the time in the world in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Boxes. Possessions tucked into newspaper and bubble wrap. Empty shelves and cabinets. All around us, reminders of how little time we had left, but we pretended not to notice.

Piece by piece, we packed away his world while we compared notes about a couple of local Thai restaurants and the latest baseball scores.

"You know, I never asked," I said, glancing up from carefully setting some wrapped bowls in a box. "How do you and Susan know each other? I mean, when did you meet?"

"Friend of a friend." He laid two glasses in a box, then pulled another from the cabinet. "That whole bunch that hangs out down at the Pike Street Pub, we've been doing that for years. One of my friends invited me a while back, then his girlfriend invited Susan."

"And then Susan invited me," I said.

He smiled. "Exactly. I take it the two of you met at work?"

I nodded. "I met her on my first day, but she was a little cold toward me at first. Probably thought the owners had hired another nitwit like the last trainer who went through there."

Connor laughed. "Well, obviously you hit it off eventually."

"Oh yeah," I said. "Didn't take long at all. The first time I called our boss a moody motherfucker under my breath, she knew we'd get along."

The rattle of car keys preceded footsteps, and Connor and I both looked up when Evan stepped into the kitchen.

"You're not letting him take any of my stuff, are you?" he said, obviously trying to look stern, but failing miserably.

"Right," I said. "Like I can tell your stuff from his."

"See?" Connor put his hands up. "Anything of yours disappears? Blame her."

"Hey!" I picked up a glass and acted like I was about to throw it at him.

He held a plate up like a shield. "Go ahead, I dare you."

"Hey, now," Evan said. "No violence. At least wait until I'm gone."

Connor and I laughed and put our respective culinary weapons down.

"You out for the night?" Connor asked.

Evan nodded. "I'm meeting Robin, then I'm working in the morning, so you probably won't see my ugly face until tomorrow night."

"Works for me." Connor gestured at the boxes and packing material. "I'll try to have some of this cleaned up and out of the way by then."

His roommate made a dismissive wave with his car keys. "Don't worry about it." He looked at his watch.

"Anyway, I'm out of here. Don't work too hard."

"We won't," Connor said.

"I meant Dani," Evan said. "You can work yourself into the ground for all I give a shit."

Connor threw a ball of newspaper at him. Evan ducked, flipped him the bird, and left. A moment later, the front door closed and we had the apartment to ourselves.

The cupboard I was working on was empty, so I closed it and moved on to the next one. When I opened it, there were no dishes, but it was fully stocked with liquor.

"What about all of this?" I gestured at the bottles.

He pursed his lips and craned his neck. "Hmm, just grab the Tanqueray and the Skyy. I think they're the only unopened bottles in there."

"You planning on drinking the rest?" I pulled out the bottles of Tanqueray and Skyy.

"All that in two weeks?" He laughed. "Not a chance."

A smartass retort stopped at the tip of my tongue as the words sank in. *Two weeks*. Not enough time to finish that cache of alcohol. Not enough time at all.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "Nothing."

"You sure?"

I let out a breath and my shoulders dropped. I watched my hands half-heartedly cocooning the unopened bottle of Skyy in bubble wrap. "Just, hard to believe it's so soon."

"I know," he said quietly. Dishes clinked and I looked up. He'd set a stack of plates down and paused, looking at the floor while he drummed his fingers on the counter.

"Guess time flies when you're having fun." I was nearly whispering.

"Yeah, it does," he said just as quietly.

Swallowing hard, I set the half-wrapped bottle aside, and we avoided each other's eyes. The only sound was the muffled crinkle of unfurling bubble wrap. Time definitely didn't fly during moments like this.

After an eternity, I looked at him. Another age passed before he looked up. When our eyes met, my breath caught the very same way it had the first time he'd looked at me in another time and place, back when we were strangers.

Before I realized what I was doing, I was moving, stepping around boxes and over packing material, my eyes never leaving his. He met me halfway, cupping the sides of my neck while I grabbed the front of his shirt, and we pulled each other into a deep kiss.

We stumbled together, turned, tried to regain our footing, pulling each other off balance and trying to get that much closer. My hip slammed against a box. Newspapers hissed and rustled, presumably falling, but they didn't matter. Connor bumped into another box and sent a tape dispenser rattling onto the floor. Something clattered. Something fell. The corner of something bit into my leg.

Then he pushed me up against the counter. I dragged his shirt up and he released me just long enough to get it over his head and out of the way. When we came back together, he pressed his hips against mine. Just the nearness of his hard cock to my clit made me shiver.

He slid his hands under my shirt and pushed it over my head. His fingers tangled in my hair and he pulled my head back, kissing my neck and collarbone so hard I was sure he would sink his teeth in. I dug my nails into his back and he released a sharp breath against my shoulder. Then he raised his head and kissed me again, both of us alternately pulling the breath right out of each other.

We were moving again, the counter no longer pressing into my back. Still kissing, still clawing at each other, but moving. He led and I followed, taking a step back for every step he took forward, trusting that he wouldn't run me into anything, not caring if he did. All I knew was that I needed him. If we crashed into something, so be it. If we tumbled to the floor in the hallway, then I'd have him there.

I just needed. Him. *Now.*

Still guiding us both down the hall, he kept a hand on the small of my back to steady me while the other went to my bra strap. With a quick, smooth motion of his fingers, my bra went slack about my shoulders. Any other night, he might have stopped to hold it up like a trophy, proclaiming his triumph at finally defeating that damned clasp, but not this time. His kiss never even missed a beat and my bra slid off my arms, falling forgotten to the floor.

We both stumbled and a second later, my back was against the wall. His lips went to my neck again, a low growl emerging from the back of his throat as if he was just barely keeping himself from biting me. I opened my eyes. The bedroom was still a few feet away, the bed several feet farther.

Here would just have to do.

With clumsy, shaking hands, I unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans. When I wrapped my fingers around his cock and stroked gently, Connor gasped. He let his head fall beside mine, moaning softly against my neck, his hips rocking back and forth in time with my strokes.

His hand slid down my leg and he pulled my knee up to his hip. With his free hand, he trailed his fingers over my pussy, teasing me through my jeans. I closed my eyes when he pressed his palm against my clit. My entire body trembled and my fingers tightened around his cock, in turn making him press a little harder with his hand.

"I want you so damned bad right now," he growled against my lips. "Fuck, I could..." He tensed when I stroked faster. "I could fuck you right here."

I shuddered. The sooner he was inside me, the sooner we'd relieve this maddening ache. But then this would be over sooner. Insatiable, immediate hunger grappled with the need to savor this—*him*—as long as humanly possible.

The latter won. "Back up," I murmured, pushing his shoulders gently.

He gave me a puzzled look, but didn't protest. He eased my leg down until my foot touched the floor, then he stepped back as I'd asked. As soon as he did, I went to my knees.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed before my lips had even touched him. When they did, a tremor nearly knocked him off balance. A shift of his weight and a hollow thump told me his hand had hit the wall, no doubt bracing himself in case his trembling knees decided to buckle. His other hand grasped my hair, loosening and tightening each time I ran my tongue around the head of his cock. My mouth followed my hand almost to the base, then back up, then down again, taking as much of him as I could. Every time I nearly deep-throated him, my pussy responded as if he was against my

G-spot instead of my tongue. He moaned softly and his cock twitched, but at this rate, I wasn't sure who would come first.

"Oh, God, baby, I don't want to come yet." His voice shook as badly as his hand. "Not yet, don't—" He gasped. Then his fingers tightened in my hair and he drew his hips back, pulling out of my reach. When I stood, he kissed me so desperately it was almost painful. We stumbled again, and this time it was his back against the wall, the impact knocking a grunt out of him but not breaking our breathless kiss.

Though God only knew who was leading now, we were moving toward the bedroom. My shoulder brushed the doorframe; I was vaguely aware of something like pain, but more than anything, it offered relief. We'd crossed the threshold. We were in the bedroom. We were almost where we wanted to be.

Separating for only a few seconds, we both kicked off the rest of our clothes. Connor pushed me up against the bed, kissing me as his hand parted my legs. We both gasped when his fingertips found my clit. In spite of the way his hand trembled, his fingers drew slow, controlled arcs around my clit until I could no longer concentrate on kissing him.

"Oh, my God," I moaned, my lips brushing his. "I want..." But he made speech impossible.

"I know what you want." His stubble grazed my chin when he spoke. "I want it too. And we will."

Though the "but not yet" wasn't spoken, it was there. It was there in the playful lilt in his voice, in the way he kept teasing my pussy with his fingers, and in the frustrated breath he released when I dug my nails into his shoulders. We both wanted it, but I knew he was doing the same thing I'd done in the hallway.

He kissed me again and leaned into me, silently asking me to lie back. I released his shoulders and handed myself over to gravity, sinking down onto the bed even though it meant breaking away from his kiss. He held himself up on one arm, the other hand still mercilessly taunting my pussy, and his tongue circled my nipple the same way his fingers did my clit.

Whispering against my skin, he said, "I want to be inside you so bad, just thinking about it is going to make me come."

I could only whimper, losing my mind to anticipation because he was finally going to do what we both wanted.

But he didn't. He knelt beside the bed and held my hips in both hands. The second his tongue met my pussy, my back arched and I sucked in a breath. Like he'd never tasted me before, he explored my pussy with his tongue, teasing me relentlessly until at last his lips closed around my clit.

"Oh, God, Connor," I moaned as his tongue drew slow circles around my clit. "Oh, God..."

One hand left my hip and I released another whimper with anticipation, this time knowing exactly what he was going to do next. One finger, then two, slipped inside me, and I could barely breathe. I combed my fingers through his hair while my other hand grasped the edge of the bed. My mouth nearly formed the words to beg him to fuck me, but his tongue changed direction and, with a single gentle sweep across my clit, rendered me mute.

His tongue made slow, easy circles. His fingers found and gently stroked my G-spot. There was desperation in every hot, uneven breath he released, but everything he did was made of restraint and control.

And with everything he did, I lost my grasp on anything resembling control. I moaned, trying to say his name, but words were out of the question. My voice must have told him all he needed to know, though, because he knew *just* how much more pressure to apply right then, and my vision went white.

When the shaking and shuddering tapered, I was aware of the echo of his name in the air, of my voice calling out to him even though I couldn't remember saying it. I did, however, hear myself whispering, "Fuck me, please, fuck me..."

Connor's lips released my clit and he stood. He grabbed my hips and thrust into me, both of us moaning when he was finally, finally, *finally* inside me. The aftershocks of my orgasm intensified with every rapid, violent stroke he took, and in seconds he drove me to another climax.

When my vision cleared, I reached for him and he came down to me, kissing me with the sweetness of my pussy on his tongue. I held his face in both hands, as much to keep him near me as to feel every last nuance of his kiss: the slow movements of his jaw, the subtle abrasiveness of his five o'clock shadow, the softness of his hair between my fingers. More than that, just the knowledge that *he* was the one kissing me.

The world seemed to slow down, my mind perceiving our desperate, rapid movements as languid and deliberate. If only for a moment, time wasn't in a hurry, wasn't trying to leave us behind. Every thrust happened so slowly, my senses had time to register every place we made contact. Whenever he withdrew, I had time to be aware of the absence of his touch before he was inside me again. Every pulse of electricity had time to radiate from my G-spot and fade completely before the next one reignited every last darkened ember.

Then Connor exhaled, releasing a shuddering breath across my cheek, and I realized it wasn't my perception at all. Our bodies really had slowed. My hips rolled in time with his long, deep strokes, every one of which lasted a delicious eternity.

He broke the kiss with a shiver, and our eyes met. His lips parted and his breath came in short, shallow gasps as strokes once again became thrusts. Faster, faster, his brow furrowing and the cords standing out on his neck, faster, still faster. Then, his eyes closed and with a breathless moan that aspired to be a roar, he came.

Releasing his breath in one long sigh, he collapsed over me and rested his forehead against my collarbone. I ran my fingers through his sweat-dampened hair, savoring every breath he released against me.

Satisfaction washed over me, relief that the hunger was quieted for the moment, but something else took its place. A heaviness in my chest, the dull ache of sad resignation. The acceptance that we weren't just winding down from hot, passionate sex, we were winding down.

Like a countdown marking the remaining seconds, we'd ticked away another moment together. How many remained, I couldn't say, but there were few, and now one



less. Each time we made love was one step closer to the last.

Connor raised his head and kissed me lightly. Touching my face, he looked at me with unreadable eyes, and I wondered if his mind was in the same place. He didn't say. I didn't ask.

Eventually, we moved all the way onto the bed and I rested my head on his shoulder. We still didn't speak, just held each other. He absently played with my hair and I trailed my fingertips across his chest.

In the kitchen, we'd started out needing each other *right now*. We simply couldn't wait. How we'd made it into the bedroom was beyond me, but here we were. That moment had cooled and our hunger was satisfied, but the need remained. I needed him. Now. Tonight. Tomorrow.

Pulling me a little closer, Connor sighed. I thought about asking if he was thinking about the same thing I was, but I was afraid to. If I did, I was afraid he'd bring up the idea of moving me to San Francisco with him. The more he mentioned it, the less I could resist. It didn't matter how much I wanted to be with him, we both knew it was a bad idea. His ex. My ex. Everything that kept me here and took him there.

I couldn't go, he had to, and that time was coming far too quickly. All over this apartment, half-packed boxes stood ready to be filled and sealed shut. Ready to carry all the pieces of his life to California.

But not everything he was taking with him could be packed in newspaper and bubble wrap.

## ***Thirty Seven***

The next morning, I was on auto-pilot at work. It wasn't fatigue this time. Though Connor and I had been up well into the early hours of dawn, I wasn't all that tired.

Maybe I was tired. I couldn't tell because I was completely numb.

I finished riding Hawkeye, put him away, then stood in the aisle, staring at the list of horses that needed to be ridden. Jekyll. Xena. Orion. SoCo. I rubbed my eyes, just trying to figure out where to start.

"Morning, Dani." Gavin's voice nearly made me groan.

I looked at him and muttered, "Morning."

"Are you working Jekyll this morning?" He sounded reasonably pleasant, but I was careful, trying to gauge his mood and figure out which Gavin I was dealing with.

"I, um, probably," I said. "I was going to ride SoCo first. Hadn't planned beyond that."

"Oh, okay." He nodded with what I assumed was approval. So he was in a pleasant mood. I couldn't decide if that was a blessing or a curse this time. A genuinely pleasant Gavin, I could handle. A volatile mood that might turn on a dime? Not so much. I just couldn't handle walking on goddamned eggshells today.

After a few benign comments about an upcoming show, he left. When his footsteps faded into silence, I released my breath and went back to going through the motions of my day.

SoCo was well-behaved and compliant today. Jekyll was pliable and predictable. I avoided Orion for the time

being; he was the type of horse who would pick up on my mood and take advantage of it. I didn't need him fucking with me until my head was clearer.

After I put Jekyll away, Gavin appeared again.

"How was he today?" he asked, petting the gelding's muzzle.

"Okay," I said. "He's getting better about that left lead, so—"

"He's still having problems with it?" Gavin barked. I cringed. From bright and sunny to dark and stormy in a heartbeat.

I took a deep breath, pushing back the anger that threatened. *I don't need this. I don't need this. Christ, Gavin, I don't need this.* "He's getting better," I said, sounding much calmer than I was. "It's just going to take time."

He huffed. "Danielle, this is getting fucking ridiculous. He's—" My mind stopped processing the words while he launched into a long, loud tirade. I'd long since learned to tune him out, but today, it didn't matter what he was yelling at me, only that he was. And with my every last nerve frayed, I couldn't take it anymore.

"What the fuck do you want me to do about it, Gavin?" I snapped, startling myself as much as I did him.

His mouth fell open. "What—"

"What do you want me to do?" I couldn't hold back now, not with everything I already had on my mind, not after months of putting up with his crap. "Do you want me to give the horses lectures about how they're supposed to behave according to your standards? I'm a fucking *trainer*, Gavin, not a goddamned miracle worker."

He set his jaw and folded his arms across his chest. "Yes, I do believe I pay you as a trainer. So I expect to see some training going on, and—"

"They're *animals*, for God's sake. There's only so much I can ask of them." I gestured at Jekyll. "He's come a long way, but he's not perfect."

"I don't expect perfection—"

"Yes, you do, Gavin," I snarled. "No matter how much progress I make with any of them, it's never enough."

"Then maybe we need to look at how much progress you're making, because I can't say I'm too impressed

about—"

"If you want them trained, then back the fuck off and let Susan and me do our goddamned jobs." I was shaking now. I was certain I was unemployed, too, but I couldn't stop. "I bust my ass for you and Leslie. So does Susan. We work our goddamned fingers to the bone, try to pull miracles out of our asses, and don't say a word. And it. Is. Never. Enough."

Gavin stared at me, slack-jawed.

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as months' worth of tension in my shoulders eased. In a calmer voice, I said, "I'm just trying to do my job, Gavin. But I'm only human. They're only horses. We all have our limits."

"So I'm noticing," he growled. "Maybe you—"

"Does it ever occur to you that maybe *you're* part of the problem?"

"What? What are you—"

"I had Xena performing almost perfectly until you started riding her and jerking on her mouth when she dared disobey. Now I'm lucky to get her over three jumps before she freaks the fuck out." Adrenaline flooded my veins and my voice rose with every word, drowning out the inner voice that tried to warn me against talking to my boss like this. "We can't get Dante anywhere near a trailer without a whole debacle of coaxing and trauma, and the only one who's ever scared him in or around a trailer is you. He—"

"Danielle, that's enough. You—"

"Do I need to remind you that you're the one who flipped out and scared him so badly you almost got me *killed*?"

His mouth snapped shut. So did mine. For a moment, we simply stared at each other, while my words echoed through the rafters. Blood pounded in my ears, and I waited for the backlash of my outburst.

Then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. I expected him to scream at me, to tell me just how many ways I was fired and could get the hell off his property, but the voice that came was low and even. "You're the trainer. You tell me what needs to be done. With Dante, Xena, him." He gestured at Jekyll with his elbow.

I blinked. "What?"

He let out a long breath. "I hired you and Susan because you can do the things I can't. If this is, if I'm keeping you from doing your job, then..." He put his hands up. "You tell me. What needs to change?"

Disbelief kept me from speaking for a moment. Then I cleared my throat and shifted my weight. "Just, you know, just trust us to do our jobs. We know the horses, we're doing the best we can. We're only human, they're only animals. Cut us some slack."

Wetting his lips, he nodded slowly. Without another word, he walked away, leaving me in uneasy silence. Had I finally gotten through to him? Maybe he'd left to go stew about it for a while. Then he'd be back to give me a piece of his mind, along with my walking papers.

Or maybe, just maybe, I'd gotten through to him. Now I could do my job without walking on eggshells. Finally, a glimmer of hope.

Even that glimmer of hope wasn't enough to pierce the heavy blanket of numbness, though. On any other day, I'd have been grinning to myself, quietly gloating in spite of my nervousness about whatever backlash was still to come. Not today. The storm was over now, the thunder quieted, and instead of enjoying the peaceful sunshine that followed, I was just as cold as I was before Gavin had wandered into the barn in a volatile mood.

Trying in vain to shake it off and focus on my job—while I still had it—I went to Jester's stall and picked up his halter. A trail ride. That was what I needed. Just one of the horses and me, somewhere other than here.

I opened his door, stepped inside, and stopped. Just...stopped. For a moment, I stared at my horse, holding his halter in hands that couldn't quite remember what to do with it.

I tried to blame the tightening knot in my stomach on the waning adrenaline from my confrontation with Gavin, but I knew full well it had nothing to do with him. The adrenaline had dropped before he'd even disappeared out of the barn. The whole situation barely registered on my radar now, because my mind had found its way back to last night.

I sniffed back tears and swallowed hard. This would be over soon. Less than two weeks, then I could find some way

to pick up the pieces and move on.

Jester nudged me with his nose, and I half-heartedly tousled his forelock. That wasn't what he wanted, apparently, so he lowered his head and pushed against me. Not enough to knock me off balance, just enough to get my attention. I scratched the side of his neck and he raised his head enough to look at me. Anyone else might have thought I was crazy, but I was sure there was concern in those big eyes and the way his ears pricked forward.

Sometimes I swore my horses could see right through me. I could hide it from the rest of the world, but they knew. Just another reason I couldn't let them go. They knew me better than almost anything that walked on two legs.

Jester nuzzled me again, the closest a horse could get to "what's wrong?". I slung his halter over my shoulder, put my arms around his neck, and buried my face in his mane.

He rested his head on my back and let me cry.

## ***Thirty Eight***

Connor and I finally made it to that steak restaurant on the waterfront.

It was, as he had said, fantastic. It had five-star restaurant ambiance with the kind of spectacular, perfectly cooked steaks I usually found in those roadhouse-style places with peanut shells on the floor.

We sat by the window with an incredible view of the sun sinking behind the Olympic Mountains beyond Puget Sound. This was the perfect place for a romantic dinner.

The perfect place for us to eat together when we'd first started seeing each other, not now. Not when we were getting close to the end credits, just waiting for one or the other to finally say "this is it."

All through dinner, that heavy cloud hung over my head, dulling all my senses. I was distantly aware of how good the food was. Vaguely picked up on the dimly-lit, intimate atmosphere. Even the sunset was muted, as if viewed through dingy, tinted glass.

The only thing that came through with crystal clarity was what hadn't been said. A decision had been made, and it was just a matter of one of us saying it was time to implement it. The opportunity presented itself a few times—a pause, a comment about his upcoming move, a suggestion of "next time" —but each such opportunity passed unclaimed.

I sipped, but didn't taste, my wine and masked a resigned sigh. In a week, he'd be gone, so I knew that conversation was inevitable. It had to be done and I

promised myself over and over that I would. Soon. I just wasn't ready to miss him yet.

And so we kept talking about this and that and nothing in particular. It was the kind of conversation that existed only to fill a void, to postpone the unavoidable. Speaking, but saying nothing. Eventually, it dwindled into silence.

No words passed between us after dinner while we walked along the waterfront, not even when we slowed our pace near the lot where his Jeep was parked. Where it was parked the first night we went out, the first time we tried to come to this place but didn't *quite* make it. *Back when*, I thought, swallowing the lump in my throat, *dinner could wait because we couldn't*.

Though the Jeep was much farther down the long expanse of asphalt, we stopped beside the railing. We didn't speak, just stood in the same place we'd stood that night when we'd coyly danced around the subject of what we both wanted until he'd finally said it.

I only hoped he would find the words again tonight because I didn't think I could.

Side by side and a million miles apart, we watched one of the ferries disappear into the night. When it was gone, the lighthouse across the water on Alki Point held my attention.

Below us, the tide lapped lazily at the rocks with gentle, rhythmic splashes. Behind us, the city hummed with the subdued sounds of a day that was winding to a close.

And still, we didn't speak.

That is until Connor put his hand over mine on the railing and released a breath. "Listen, Dani, I—" He paused, watching his hand gently squeeze mine.

I chewed my lip and waited for him to speak again, suddenly unsure if I wanted him to say it after all. The silence had been unbearable, but now I wasn't so sure I could take this. *No, no, it has to be done*. Sadness tugged at my heart, but relief was already starting to creep in.

Lacing our fingers together, he lifted our joined hands off the railing. He put his other hand over mine and his palm was cool and damp with perspiration. His thumb moved back and forth across the back of mine and, drawing a deep, unsteady breath, he met my eyes.



"I know we've talked about California. I know we've—" He paused.

My heart pounded. *No, no, don't. Please. You know I love you, but I can't. I just can't.* "Connor—"

"Let me finish. Please. Dani, I love you. I love you and I—" Another pause. "When I said I wanted you to come with me, I meant it." Another deep breath.

He dropped to one knee and my heart dropped to my feet.

Panic surged through my veins. I hadn't seen this coming. I couldn't believe it was happening. Blood pounded in my ears, thundering so loudly it almost drowned out his voice when he spoke:

"Dani, will you marry me?"

No poetry. No memorized verse. Nothing but the simple words of a complicated question.

I couldn't speak.

I couldn't breathe.

*I couldn't.*

His thumb ran along the back of my hand again. That gentle, affectionate touch, underscored by a hint of unsteadiness, brought tears to my eyes.

"Connor, I—" Our eyes met and his held a heartbreaking mix of hope and fear. I swallowed hard. "Connor, I can't."

His lips parted, but he said nothing. Disbelief was etched into every line and contour of his face, his wide eyes pleading with me to clarify what I'd just said. Clarify or retract.

"I can't do it. I'm sorry, Connor." My voice was flat, almost to the point of cold as I bit back my emotions. I forced myself to appear calmer and more collected than I was. Maybe it was cruel, leading him to believe this was easy, but even one tear would be a crack in the dam, and I wouldn't be able to stand this ground if my emotions brought me to my knees.

With no expression on his face, he released my hand, opening his fingers but otherwise not moving. Leaving it to me to break contact. Leaving it to me to pull away.

Tightening my jaw to keep myself together, I gently freed my hand. He put his on the railing to steady himself as

he stood. When his knee lifted off the pavement, I knew the offer was off the table. I expected some sense of relief, but there came none. All that came was a sick feeling of finality, that this was really and truly over.

Connor looked out at the water, furrowing his brow as if something required intense concentration. Cleared his throat. Then again. Without looking at me, he said, "I guess I should take you home then."

Cold water rushed through my veins. No. No, this had to end now. If it was going to end, it needed to do so now because it hurt too much to be this close to him.

There was only one thing I could do.

"No," I said. "I'll, I—"

He looked at me, eyebrows raised.

*Go on, Dani, twist the knife a little harder.* I dropped my gaze and took a step back. The first step. The hardest step. *They should all get easier after this, right?*

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I said, "I'll get a cab." And before I lost my nerve, I turned to go.

I took the next step.

And the next.

And kept going.

He didn't call after me.

I'd only gone a few yards when footsteps behind me echoed in a faster rhythm than my own, and I hoped to God he wasn't trying to follow me. There were only so many times I could make myself say no to him before my heart sided with him and outnumbered my better judgment.

I looked over my shoulder in time to see him disappear into the shadows as he walked away from me. A few spare beams of light reached him from elsewhere in the lot and hinted at his silhouette, and I watched him until my vision blurred.

Choking back tears, I turned and continued in the opposite direction.

It wasn't supposed to be this hard to let go. This wasn't supposed to happen. But it was. It had.

I walked on. Faster. Further. Past the restaurant where we'd dined. Past people who murmured words of concern that drowned in my heartbeat. Past the windows and faces of this city that I couldn't call home but still chose over

Connor.

And every step I took was just as hard as the first.

## ***Thirty Nine***

I didn't sleep that night.

Crying myself to sleep didn't work. Physical and emotional exhaustion were no match for regret, confusion, and heartache. Over and over I relived the scene down by the waterfront.

Connor dropping to one knee. The tremor in his hands while he waited for my answer. The hurt in his eyes when he got it. Walking away from him. Watching him walk away from me.

Of all the things I'd anticipated and dreaded, his proposal had come out of left field. I didn't see it coming, but there it was.

In a perfect world, I'd have said yes before he finished the question. I'd never loved someone like I loved Connor. But this wasn't a perfect world. This was a world in which loving him meant taking a thousand mile gamble, a gamble I'd already lost once. This was a world in which I had two horses that I couldn't afford to move and wasn't about to sell.

This was also a world in which another woman had worn his ring just a few months earlier. If he could so easily leave her behind, then he could do the same to me.

It wasn't a perfect world, so this was how it had to be, but I'll be damned if it didn't hurt like nothing else I'd ever experienced.

Even though I knew it was futile, I tried to sleep, but gave up when the sun rose. Sitting up in bed, rubbing my

eyes, only one thought rang clear in my muddled, foggy mind: There was no way in hell I could go to work today.

I picked up my phone and stared at the keypad, trying to remember who I was supposed to call and how to do it. Muscle memory kicked in, and I scrolled to Leslie's number and hit send.

"Hello?"

"Leslie? It's Dani," I said. "I'm, um, I need to call out today."

"Oh? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I just, my back's been giving me some trouble."

"I'll have Susan cover your lessons today, then. Will you be back tomorrow?"

*Tomorrow. Oh God. There's another day after this one.*

"Dani?"

I cleared my throat. "I should be. I'll let you know."

After I hung up, I got out of bed and shuffled into the kitchen. There, I poured what I was certain would be the first of many, many cups of coffee.

Several times throughout the day, I considered staging a miraculous recovery and going to work. At least that was something to do besides wandering around my apartment, clinging to a coffee cup while last night ran through my sleep-deprived mind like a broken record. Maybe I needed a trail ride to clear my head. Or a few runs through the jump course on Xena.

At this point, I doubted even that would be enough to distract me though. The last thing I needed was to be thinking about walking away from Connor when Xena decided at the last second not to go over a jump. Frustrating though it was, steering clear of the horses right now was probably my *safest* choice.

When my phone rang that evening, shortly after the time I'd normally be leaving the barn, I half-expected it to be Susan. She knew I wouldn't call out sick unless I was in Intensive Care, so I had no doubt she'd want to know what was up. But deep down, I knew it wasn't her.

The letters on the caller ID had a split second to confirm my fears before tears blurred my vision.

*Connor.*

Though I couldn't turn him away, I wasn't so sure I could talk to him either. Swallowing tears and pride, I flipped my phone open.

"Hey."

"Hey." He was quiet for a second. "Can we talk?"

*No. Please God, no.* I took a breath. "Yeah, we can talk."

"I'd like to—" He paused, and I imagined him closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, frustration knitting his eyebrows together. Then he let out a long breath. "I'd like to talk in person."

It was my turn to close my eyes and press my fingers against my nose as I'd imagined him doing. I wasn't sure I could face him after I'd turned my back on him last night. But I owed him that much.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "We can do that. Do you, um, do you want to come over?"

He hesitated. I thought I heard him swallow hard. His voice was flat when he said, "Yeah. Are you home?"

"Yes."

"Want me to come over now?"

*Not now. Not now. Please, not now.* "Now is fine. I'll be here."

He cleared his throat. "Give me about twenty minutes, then."

After we'd hung up, I went into the bedroom and occupied myself with my appearance. I wasn't concerned with impressing him. I didn't care what I looked like at this point. Fixing and re-fixing my hair was something to occupy otherwise idle hands. Changing my shirt three times over helped.

I was midway through my fifth ponytail when a knock at the door turned my blood cold. Looking at myself in the mirror, I took a deep breath and steeled myself. I tossed my ponytail holder on the counter and left the bathroom.

When I opened the door, my throat closed.

He wasn't dressed the same as last night and had a few more hours of lost sleep under his eyes, but otherwise, he looked exactly like he had the moment I'd turned him down. Hurt. Confused. Probably more than a little humiliated.

I stepped aside, gesturing for him to come in. He walked past me and I couldn't decide whether or not I was imagining the sudden chill in the air. Closing the door, I followed him into my living room.

And there, we faced each other. We were a few feet apart, well out of arm's reach. There was a silent, invisible barrier between us, a line carved in ice that neither of us would have dared to cross even if we'd been standing closer together. All those times we couldn't keep our hands off each other, and now this.

Connor was the one to break the silence, but the ice remained firmly in place.

"I don't even know where to start," he said softly.

"Neither do I." I folded my arms across my chest to ward off a phantom chill. "Connor, what happened last night?"

At that, he met my eyes. "You tell me."

I dropped my gaze. "Look, I'm sorry about how, about..." I chewed my lip. *About what, Dani?* About walking away? Yes and no. It was an act of self-preservation, one with which I hadn't intended to hurt him, but had done so nonetheless. I was sorry for hurting him, but not for saying no.

Clothing rustled when he shifted his weight. "Well, I can't say it was the reaction I was expecting."

I forced myself to look at him. "What was I supposed to do? After everything we've talked about, did you..." I stopped myself before I asked if he really thought I'd say yes.

He flinched. "I didn't think you'd walk away."

I let out a breath. "I'm sorry. I just... I freaked out. The whole thing caught me off guard."

"I guess last night was just full of surprises, wasn't it?" Was that bitterness? Or pain? Maybe both?

I gave an apologetic shrug. "Connor, you're leaving in a week, I—"

"And I asked because I hoped you'd come with me."

"We've been through this."

"Yes, I know," he said.

"None of this is easy," I said. "For either of us. But this isn't making it any easier."

"I know." His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. "I guess I hoped..."

"You hoped what?"

He sighed, then shook his head and avoided my eyes. "Call me persistent, I just hate leaving without you."

Sudden anger flared in my chest, but I couldn't tell if it was genuine frustration with him or just a defense mechanism to keep the tears at bay. "So I'm supposed to just put my entire goddamned life in boxes and follow you? On a whim?"

"Follow me?" he said. "You make it sound like I just want to drag you along while I'm doing my thing. I want to be with you, Dani."

"Funny, I've heard that before." The bitterness in my voice startled me.

"And you think I'd do that to you?" He looked at the ceiling, then closed his eyes and exhaled. "Christ, I thought you knew me better than that."

"I thought I knew him—"

"This isn't about your ex, Dani," he snapped, making me jump. "It's about you and me. Nothing more."

"And this was supposed to be something temporary," I said. "Just something short-term, some fun together." I swallowed hard. "Nothing more."

His lips thinned into a bleached line. "It was supposed to be, yes." He drew a ragged breath. "Except it didn't quite work out that way, did it?"

"No, it didn't. I wasn't supposed to fall in love with you, but I did." There it was. The crack in the dam. I'd said it to him countless times, but admitting to it here and now rattled me straight to the core. In a trembling voice, I added, "That doesn't change the fact that we can't do this."

"What if we can?"

"We can't. We've been through this." *And Jesus, it hurts every time we go through it again.* "I can't give up everything in my life and take the chance that in a few months, you'll get bored with me and change your mind."

"Dani, do you really think I'd suggest having you move to California with me if I thought for a minute that this was some fleeting, temporary thing? I even looked into—"

"I told you, I've heard that before," I said. "You said



yourself the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

He flinched, pursing his lips. "Maybe it is. You're just forgetting that you've never heard it from me."

"Not yet." I cringed at the ice in my own voice, but it was the only thing keeping me in one piece.

"What makes you think I would ever do that to you?" he asked. "Give me one reason besides the fact that *he* did it."

It was out before I could stop it: "What about *your* ex?"

His eyebrows jumped. "My ex? What about her?"

I swallowed. "You started seeing me very shortly after you left her."

"I did, yes." He paused, cocking his head. "What does—"

"If you can move on that fast from someone after that long," I said. "How do I know you won't get bored with me after a few months and walk away?"

"That was her," he said. "This is—"

"Is different. Of course it is. How can I be sure it is?"

He stared at me, lips parted and eyes wide.

I blinked back tears. "How do I know you won't wake up one morning and be over me like you got over her?"

He started to speak. Stopped. Looked away. More than once, he looked like he was about to say something, but didn't. For the first time since I'd known him, he seemed completely at a loss for words.

Guilt pressed itself into my ribcage. "Connor, I'm—"

He put his hands up and shook his head. "No, forget it. I've heard enough." He walked past me, carefully pulling his shoulder back so we wouldn't accidentally touch.

"Connor, wait." I reached for his arm but grasping only thin air.

With one hand on the doorknob, he looked over his shoulder. "No, there's nothing more to say."

"Please, there's—"

"Let me rephrase that," he said. "There's nothing left to say that I care to hear. Enjoy Seattle, Dani."

Before I could make another feeble attempt to keep him here, the slamming of the door echoed in my ears and

through my silent, empty apartment.

## ***Forty***

That night was just as restless as the one before, but I went to work the next day anyway. Though I was so exhausted my bones ached, I couldn't stay in my apartment.

While I led Xena out of the barn, Gavin passed me in the aisle and said nothing. He didn't even look at me. Another day and I still had a job, with no backlash in sight from our confrontation, and I didn't care.

Though Xena was a handful and a half even when I wasn't tired, I rode her first. Today, she was in one of her devious moods, when she would decide at the last possible second that no, she didn't feel like going over that particular jump. When she was like this, I had to be completely focused, staying one step ahead of her, lest I end up in the dirt.

And that was perfect for my current state of mind. Concentrating on her meant not thinking about Connor. For the duration of my ride, my thoughts were consumed by lead changes, making sure we made it over every jump, and anticipating Xena's every move.

When we were finished, we hadn't even cleared the arena gate before Connor and last night came crashing back into my awareness. I was so tangled up in thoughts of him, I overshot the door to the barn, leading Xena right past it and continuing down the path beside the pastures. We were halfway to the back paddocks when one of the other mares called to Xena and she answered back.

I shook myself back into the present. I'd been aware, on some level, of where I was, but suddenly remembered

where I was supposed to be. Sighing, I turned Xena around and we went back to the barn. At least if anyone saw me, they'd just assume I was walking her around to cool her down. They didn't need to know she'd long since cooled down. It was a convenient excuse, one I'd use if the need arose.

I cross-tied Xena, unsaddled her, and went about grooming her. My brain couldn't process all the simple tasks, but muscle memory took me through the motions, and eventually, Xena was back in her stall.

I hung her halter on the door, then picked up my saddle and shuffled into the tack room. That saddle was probably the lightest and least cumbersome piece of equipment I owned, but it still required a monstrous effort to heave it up onto the rack. A thick mixture of numbness and exhaustion congealed beneath my skin, turning even the simplest movements into slow, difficult tasks.

Susan appeared in the tack room doorway. "Hey, girl, you okay? Leslie said you hurt your back the other day."

I watched my fingers play with the braided leather of a set of reins. "Just playing hooky."

"Uh huh, so you—" She stopped. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. Turning away, I looked in the dusty mirror on the wall and decided my ponytail needed to be rearranged for the ninetieth time since I'd left the house. I pulled the elastic band out and focused my attention on gathering my hair up into it again. My arms ached and my fingers protested, but I forced both mind and body to obey.

"Dani, what's wrong?"

Satisfied with my ponytail, I looked for something else to do with restless hands. "Just, some things..." I swallowed. "With Connor."

She stepped inside the tack room, eyes wide. "What happened?"

I dropped onto one of the tack trunks, resting my elbows on my knees and my chin on my hands. Tears threatened, but I forced them back.

"Dani?"

Taking a breath, I said, "He asked me to marry him."

"He—" She shook her head, blinking rapidly. "He what?"

"You heard me."

"Like, down on one knee?"

I nodded.

"Diamond in hand?"

Biting my lip I replayed the proposal in my mind for the thousandth time. An engagement ring hadn't even occurred to me, and only now did I realize he hadn't offered one. I shrugged. "Well, no, no diamond, but—"

"No diamond?" She cocked her head. "I'm surprised. I would have expected him of all people to pull out all the stops and—"

"Not that it matters," I said through my teeth. "I said no."

"*What?*" She almost shrieked, clapping a hand over her mouth and glancing over her shoulder in case someone was nearby. Then she turned back to me. In a loud whisper, she said, "You turned him down?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's leaving soon. I can't. And this was so sudden. Just, completely out of nowhere."

She took a breath. "Maybe it was a heat of the moment thing. He wants you to go, so maybe this was his Hail Mary pass."

I blew out a breath. There was only cold comfort in the possibility that Connor's proposal had just been a desperate, last ditch effort to keep me. Maybe he'd known deep down I'd say no, but figured he had nothing to lose.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, "It's a moot point anyway. He knows I can't afford to take Jester and Calypso, and there's no way in hell I'm leaving them behind."

"Okay, fair enough," she said. "Have you guys considered the long distance thing?"

I shook my head and stood. "We ruled that out a while ago."

"You also ruled out any kind of relationship, but look at you now," she said.

"Look at us now?" I laughed bitterly, the only thing I could do to keep the tears at bay. "More like, look at us up until the day before yesterday."

Her eyes widened. "You two split over it?"

"What else could we do?" I didn't feel the need to fill her in on everything we'd said the night before. Telling her

meant hearing myself say all the things I shouldn't have said. It meant reliving the moment he'd walked away from me just like I'd walked away from him.

Instead, I sighed and shrugged. "I said no, so we called it quits."

"Are you out of your mind?" she asked. "Dani, he's—"

"What am I supposed to do?" I snapped, tears blurring my vision. "I can't go with him. He knows it, I know it. Why he asked anyway, I don't—"

"Look, Dani, it may have been in the heat of the moment, but I don't think he would just say it."

"Maybe not, but could he really have thought it through?" I asked. "Maybe at that moment, he thought he meant it, but given a few hours or days or weeks to think about it, he might figure out it's not what he wants. And where does that leave me? In San Francisco wondering what the hell I was thinking *again*."

"Or you could be sitting in your apartment in Seattle wondering the very same thing."

I clenched my jaw and let out a long breath. "How would that be different from the last few months?"

She sighed. "Dani, Connor isn't Matt."

"And I didn't think Matt was like that either. I just can't take that chance again, Suze." I swallowed hard. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me."

Susan sighed. "Except Connor isn't the one who fooled you the first time."

"No, and I'd rather not give him the opportunity," I said.

"Dani," she said. "I know the man. I know him very, very well."

"You didn't know he was the one who left his ex-fiancée."

She shifted her weight. "Maybe not. But I..." She trailed off.

"See?" I said. "You didn't think he'd leave her, let alone jump into another relationship with me before the ashes were cold."

"Okay, maybe I don't know everything there is to know about him," she said. "but I do know that he's a good guy. A really good guy. You could do a lot worse than taking

the risk and going with him."

"I could do a lot worse than staying here, too," I said.

"Oh? Like what?"

I looked at her, then dropped my gaze. "Susan, I love him, but it's over."

"You don't want it to be, though, do you?"

"I don't want him to move to San Francisco, but he is."

"That wasn't my question."

I swallowed hard, blinking back tears and starting toward the tack room door.

"Dani..."

Resting my hand on the doorframe, I looked at her. "The answer's still the same."

## ***Forty One***

For the rest of the day, I forced myself to ignore all things Connor. I dried my eyes and threw myself into my job, doing everything I could to occupy myself with anything that wasn't him. Summoning every ounce of workaholism I could muster, I evicted his memory from my mind. Even during idle moments and down time, I focused on *not* focusing on him or the leaden guilt in my gut.

And for the most part, I succeeded.

Running on auto-pilot, I made it through the day. I could do this. It was over, Connor was gone, and just like I'd moved on from Matt, I would move on from him. I'd thought I couldn't get over Matt, but I did, eventually replacing pain with cold apathy as a soundtrack to the memories we'd made.

I would do the same with Connor.

It was over.

Life would go on.

I would go on.

The cold truth, however, wouldn't be denied, and it waited patiently until I was in bed. Until I let my guard down. Then it settled in and made itself known, molding itself against me as the emptiness where Connor used to sleep beside me. I'd slept alone plenty of times since we'd started dating, but there was a world of difference between 'without him now' and 'without him'.

I sat up to avoid his absence, hugging my knees to my chest and inching away from the place that was once his. It



made little difference, though. Sitting like this was only marginally better than lying where he used to hold me.

This was nothing like my split with Matt. That breakup had hurt. I'd grieved for our relationship, begged him to reconsider, cried into my pillow night after sleepless night. But deep down, I'd known it was over. The ground had moved beneath me and it was up to me to find my footing again.

This, however, wasn't right. The echoes of the slamming door still rang in my ears, emphasizing the hollow silence of his absence. This place—my bed, my room, my world—wasn't right without him. All the places I'd tried to hold on to were empty and I had no one to blame but myself.

Icy tentacles of truth coiled around my heart as the epiphany settled itself deep in my gut.

I'd said no to Connor because I couldn't compromise myself again. I couldn't uproot my life and follow someone while he followed his dreams. I couldn't lose myself in trying not to lose him.

It was a mistake to follow Matt to Seattle, but I could no longer tell myself I regretted coming to this place. If I hadn't, I never would have met Connor, and no matter how much it hurt to be away from him now, I could never convince myself I regretted my relationship with him. I regretted what I'd done to him, the fact that I'd walked away from him, but not the fact that it happened.

And I was lying to myself if I thought the best place for me was anywhere Connor Graham wasn't. All this time, I'd worried about going with him and making a huge mistake. Now it was clear: the only mistake was letting him go. For all my fear of getting hurt, I'd hurt the best thing that ever happened to me.

This was the wrong ending. Whether or not I ultimately ended up going with him to California, or if we just peacefully went our separate ways, it couldn't end like *this*. I had to make this right.

I picked up my phone off the bedside table and flipped it open. It was almost one in the morning and normally, I wouldn't consider calling anyone at this hour unless there was blood or fire, but Connor was an insomniac. Odds were

good that he was awake.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to call him. Whether it was cowardice, consideration, or a combination of the two, I decided to text him instead. If he was asleep or close to it, a text could be ignored more readily than a call.

Or so I could tell myself when he ignored my text.

But what to say? He deserved more than an apology by text, and a friendly, if non-committal, salutation would probably just make him roll his eyes. I needed something in between, something to bridge the gap and make a connection. From there, I'd figure it out.

With a shaking hand, I typed a few words: *Can we talk?*

I stared at the message for a long moment, then deleted it. The question invited a 'no' I wasn't sure I could handle.

*I'd like to talk.*

No. If I sent that, then once the message disappeared down the line, every second of silence would be agony. It would be impossible to tell when 'hadn't gotten the message yet' became 'the silence is the answer'.

I finally wrote: *Are you awake?*

It was a start. It was something. And before I could think twice, it was sent.

Hugging my knees to my chest with one arm, I stared at the phone in the upturned palm of my other hand. When the vivid blue backlight shut off, I stared at the darkness where its glow used to be.

And I waited. Hoping for a response, afraid of what it might say. Hoping for a Connorgram. I tried to laugh at that word, but the sound that came out was more like a whimper of pain, which is exactly what it was. That was what he'd called his messages back when everything was right in the world. Somehow, it just didn't seem to fit in this situation.

A burst of shrill beeping and bright blue light made me jump, and my phone tumbled onto the bed beside my feet. With shaking hands, I flipped it open.

*Yes.*

The simple message was just ambiguous enough to keep both hope and disappointment at bay. I'd made contact, he'd reciprocated, but that was all he'd given me.

Now what?

I stared at the flashing cursor on the blank reply screen. After a few minutes of agonizing over every possible response—from either of us—I said, *I'd like to talk*. Just before I sent it, I added, *In person*.

Like last night, I wasn't sure I could deal with seeing his face, but I owed him that much. This wasn't a conversation that could be had via text messages, and if that meant showing my face to the man I'd stupidly walked away from, the man I'd pushed away, then so be it.

I just prayed he'd give me the chance.

A full ten minutes of silence passed, just long enough for me to be certain he'd given me his answer, when another message came through.

*When?*

I gulped. When indeed?

It was after one in the morning. I was awake. He was awake. Why wait?

With my heart in my throat, I sent back, *Now*.

A few minutes later, the sound that broke the silence wasn't my text beep. It was my ringtone. I stared at the phone for a second, disbelieving, unsure if I could handle hearing his voice, but before I could stop myself, I answered.

"Hey," I said, my mouth dry.

"You really want to get together at this hour?" His voice was flat. Neutral. Offering nothing. *He's a difficult man to read unless he wants to be read*, Susan said in my mind.

I cleared my throat. "I'd rather not wait."

He was quiet for a moment except for a long exhalation. Even that was unreadable. Frustration? Indecision? Finally, he said, "I'll be up for a while if you want to come by."

Before I could convince myself that I couldn't face him, I said, "I'll be there in a few."

## ***Forty Two***

Connor didn't look at me when he answered the door. He simply pulled it open and stood aside, gesturing for me to come in. After it was closed and the deadbolt was in place, I followed him into the kitchen.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

When the ritual of cups, cream, and sugar had run its course, we stood on opposite sides of the small kitchen amidst stacks of sealed boxes. I stole a few surreptitious looks at him, not sure if I was trying to gauge his mood or simply drink him in just in case this was the last time I saw him.

His glasses didn't quite mask the dark circles under his eyes, and there was both exhaustion and tension in his posture. Whenever he turned his head, he did so slowly, as if the muscles were simply too tight to cooperate, yet his shoulders were hunched low, almost slumped.

*Stanford University* was emblazoned across his gray sweatshirt in red block letters. I wondered if he'd done that deliberately to throw a little salt on the wound or if it was just the next clean shirt in the drawer when he'd dressed.

Just looking at him made my chest ache. I couldn't decide if I wanted to run to him or away from him. I thought it hurt to be this close to him right before I walked away the other night, but that was nothing compared to this. The dust had settled and there was no longer the panic, the adrenaline, the heart-pounding need to escape. All that

remained were pieces to be picked up and the uncertainty of who would pick up which pieces.

I wasn't sure just where to start, and his expression offered me no clues. Testing the waters with mundane conversation, I said, "Is Evan home?"

"No."

Silence.

I tried being a little more direct. "You look exhausted."

With a half-shrug, he patiently played along with my feeble attempt at small talk, though he still kept his eyes down. "Haven't been sleeping."

"You never sleep."

His eyes finally met mine, if only for a second. "Not lately, anyway."

More silence.

So we were going to play this game again, this dance around what needed to be said and heard. But this wasn't something we could dance around. Tonight was a night for uncomfortable truths, the kind that couldn't be skirted with humor or contained in the occasional lyrical bit of memorized poetry.

*On with it, then.* I couldn't quite maintain eye contact. "Listen, I want to talk about the other night."

"I figured," he said, his tone flat. He folded his arms across his chest and rested his hip against the counter.

I forced myself to hold his gaze. "I made a mistake the other night."

"That makes two of us," he growled.

I flinched and dropped my gaze, the words hitting me in the chest and making breathing nearly impossible. "Connor, I'm sorry."

"So am I." By the sound of it, he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"Will you at least hear me out?" I said.

His eyebrows lifted and his jaw set even tighter as he challenged me with a silent glare. I struggled to suppress the anger that wanted to come out. Whatever contempt he gave me, I had earned. If I had any hope of breaking through that contempt, I had to keep myself together.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "Look, I never should have walked away the other night. I mean, even if we can't

do this, it shouldn't end like that. Or like it did last night." I preemptively flinched, expecting another icy dig, but he said nothing.

A few seconds passed before I went on. "I'm sorry, Connor, I—" I set my coffee cup down, afraid my unsteady hands would drop it. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say."

"There isn't much left to say, is there?" Every word was carved in ice.

"Connor—"

"I mean, what's changed?" he said. "Did you suddenly remember how much you want to leave this place and decide to come back to the one offering you a way out?"

"No, no, it's not like that at all," I said.

"Sure about that?"

"Yes, I am." I took a breath. "It has nothing to do with this place or that place or anything like that. I just figured out that I want to be wherever you are."

He sniffed sharply. "Little late in the game for that, I'm afraid."

His sarcasm set my teeth on edge and before I could stop myself, I growled, "Not a believer in giving second chances, are we?"

"Not when I've already given entirely too much to begin with," he snapped. He slammed his coffee cup down on the counter. "Dani, I offered you everything I could think to give. I offered everything I *could* give, but that wasn't enough." He snorted bitterly. "I guess I should have taken my own advice about doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." He looked away, releasing a breath through his teeth, and when he spoke again, his tone was gentler. "I offered you the rest of my life. That's not something I offer lightly, nor is it something I'm willing to have turned down twice."

"Yet I'm not the first woman you've offered it to, am I?"

He flinched and dropped his gaze.

"What am I supposed to say, Connor?" I tried to keep my voice gentle and steady. "You were engaged to another woman a few months ago, and now I'm supposed to believe you want—"

"You know *nothing* about what happened with Olivia," he said.

"You're right, I don't know a damned thing about her," I said. "I hardly know a thing about how your last relationship ended, so how am I to know you're over her? That you have any business even thinking of marrying me so soon after you were engaged to her?"

"Okay, fine." He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I haven't told you enough about my past. I guess I was too busy being with you to want to spend any more time wallowing through history, but maybe I should have if you can't take me at face value."

"That's—"

"I mean, I could have spent an evening telling you about all the fights she and I had over stupid shit," he said. "But that would have cut into the time I was enjoying with you, and given that we were so limited on time, it just didn't seem like a priority."

I started to speak again, but he wasn't finished.

"Maybe the other night, I got off on the wrong foot." He laughed bitterly. "Or the wrong knee, I guess. Maybe, before I proposed to you, I should have stopped to tell you that I never asked Olivia to marry me."

I blinked. "What?"

He swallowed hard, the anger suddenly fading when he looked at the floor. "I never proposed to her."

"But you—" I swallowed. "You were engaged, weren't you?"

He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yes, we were. Because somewhere along the line, we decided we'd been together long enough, we might as well get married." He met my eyes again. "Never mind the fact that we were miserable together. Or the fact that she wanted kids and I didn't. She was the last person in the world I had any business marrying, but she was there, I was there, and for whatever reason, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

I bit my lip. I had no idea how to respond.

He let out a breath. "Dani, I never laid awake at night staring at the ceiling and wondering what it would be like to be married to her. I never spent a solid week trying to find just the right time to ask. We were getting married because

it seemed like the right thing to do. I asked you because—" He dropped his gaze again and exhaled. "It seemed like the *only* thing to do."

I ran a hand through my hair, avoiding his eyes. "I guess I thought—" I swallowed. "I thought you asked in the heat of the moment."

"It wasn't the first time I'd asked you to come with me."

"It was the first time you mentioned marriage."

"What made you think it was the first time I'd *thought* about it?"

"You didn't have a—" I hesitated. There was no way to say it without sounding shallow and materialistic.

"A ring?" An angry edge crept into his voice.

I exhaled, then nodded. "Look, I don't care about a ring. I honestly don't. I just thought, if you—" I sighed. "It just made me wonder if it was a last second thing to get me to come with you."

Staring at the floor, he chewed his lip and drummed his fingers on the counter.

"I'm sorry," I said. "The ring doesn't matter. Honestly, I don't care about—"

"Do you want to know why I didn't have a ring?" he said suddenly, meeting my eyes with a look so intense it turned my blood to ice.

I held my breath. Then, even though I wasn't entirely sure I was prepared for whatever revelation it would bring, I nodded.

Looking anywhere but at me, he said, "I looked at rings. A few times. Found one in particular that I wanted to give you." He wetted his lips. "But if I bought it, then..." He looked up, then closed his eyes and took another breath.

Barely whispering, I said, "Then what?"

When our eyes met again, my heart almost stopped. I'd never seen someone so deeply hurt, particularly not at my own hands. I knew the night I walked away that I'd hurt him, but only now did I understand just how much.

He swallowed hard. "If I'd bought that ring," he whispered, "then I wouldn't have had the money to move your horses to California."

My hand went to my mouth in a futile effort to hold in



the breath my lungs forced out. My heart fell to my feet and a lump rose in my throat.

"I tried to tell you that last night," he said. "But then we... I tried to tell you, but things just went downhill, and..." He sighed, making a gesture that was equal parts dismissive and frustrated.

"Connor..."

He gripped the counter and looked at the floor. "I thought it through, Dani. I thought about it constantly. When I asked you to come with me, I meant it. When I asked you to marry me, I meant it."

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw, trying to keep myself together. "Connor, I am so, so sorry." It wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough. Nothing I could say could ever scratch the surface of enough, but it was all I could give. It was all I had.

"You'd said no whenever I asked you to come to California with me," he said. "And I thought it was because you didn't think I was serious. That you thought I was just flippantly asking you to do it, without thinking at all about the future. About anything but what *I* wanted." He took a breath. "I asked you to marry me because I wanted you to know just how much I meant it. That, and..." He closed his eyes, his cheek rippling when he set his jaw. Then, taking a deep breath, he looked at the floor and said, "...everything else aside, I asked because I *wanted* you to marry me."

*And the more you tell me, the less I deserve you.* I released a breath that nearly came out as a sob. "Connor, I—" I shook my head. "This all just happened so fast, and I... it..."

"I know we were moving fast," he said. "When we started out, I had no idea we'd be in this situation. I mean, I knew I was leaving soon, I just didn't think I'd meet someone I didn't want to leave."

Without meeting his eyes, I said, "Would you still have asked if you weren't leaving?"

He said nothing for a moment. Denim scuffed against a cabinet and the fabric of his Stanford sweatshirt rustled. Barely whispering, he said, "Maybe not so soon, but yes. This isn't something I would ever rush, but it came down to now or never. If there had been more time. If we—" His voice

caught.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as whispered words from our past thundered through my consciousness. My composure crumbling, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "*If we had world enough, and time...*"

"...this coyness lady were no crime." His voice tried to crack. He cleared his throat and I thought he'd say more, but he didn't. Stillness descended around the echo of those two simple lines of poetry.

"Dani, look at me," he said finally, his voice gentle.

I did, blinking a few times until the tears cleared enough for his face to come into focus.

He took a breath. "If you'd known at the time that I wasn't asking in the heat of the moment, if you knew how much I'd thought it through and why I didn't have a ring..." He exhaled hard, then set his jaw. "What would you have said?"

I chewed my lip and focused on the floor between us, not sure what to say.

After a moment, he growled, "That's what I thought." I looked up as he gestured toward the door. "Why don't—"

"Connor, wait." I put my hands up. "I'll be honest. That night, I probably would have said the same thing." He started to speak but I cut him off. "But I guarantee I'd still be here tonight."

He eyed me, then relaxed a bit against the counter, adopting a slightly less hostile posture that suggested he was willing to hear me out.

"The thing is," I paused. "You know why I came to Seattle in the first place. I uprooted my entire life to follow someone I thought wanted me. And ever since then, I've been afraid of planning my life around someone else."

"I wasn't asking you to plan your life around me, Dani," he said, his voice soft. "I was asking you to plan your life *with* me."

Fresh tears stung my eyes. "And I see that now. But you understand what I was afraid of, don't you?"

He chewed his lip, then nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"I can't apologize enough. For walking away, and

thinking you were asking on impulse, all of it." I wiped my eyes and sniffed, struggling to keep what was left of my composure. "Jesus, all this time I thought you were asking me to give everything up for you, and you..." I slumped against the counter and covered my face with my hand. There was no hiding how fast I was breaking down, but at least I couldn't see him.

Taking a ragged breath and choking back the tears as best I could, I finally forced myself to look at him again. "All I can say is that I'm sorry and I love you. I never meant to hurt you. I—"

"What would you say if I asked you now?"

I stared at him.

"If I asked you again." He held my gaze even while his voice shook. "Right here, right now. Yes or no. What would you say?"

My throat tightened around the words. Around the *single* word. I couldn't breathe. All I could do was stare at him in disbelief.

He took a step toward me. Then another. When we were little more than an arm's length apart, he spoke so softly I wouldn't have heard him if he was even a few inches further away. "Dani, if I asked you to marry—"

I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him into a kiss. He stumbled, but caught himself with one hand on the counter, his other arm wrapping around me. He quickly found his footing and his hand went to my neck, then into my hair.

When he broke the kiss, he didn't pull away. Our foreheads touched and every breath he drew rushed past my lips. With the pad of his thumb, he brushed a tear from my face and caressed my cheek.

"Would it be safe to assume that's a yes?" he asked.

I laughed, quickly wiping away another tear. "It's a yes."

He smiled and took his glasses off, setting them on the counter behind me, giving him the perfect opportunity to pull me even closer before he kissed me again.

"I promise," he said. "I *will* get you a ring someday."

"I don't care about a ring."

"I know, but—"

"Really. I don't. We'll just get a couple of gold bands and call it good."

A playful grin tugged at his lips. "So would you be upset if I *did* get you one?"

"Furious." I kissed him, letting it deepen and linger for a long moment while every touch and taste said *yes, this is real, yes, he's still here, yes, we still are.*

When we looked at each other again, his humor faded a bit and he tenderly smoothed my hair. "I'm glad you came back."

"Me too." I smiled. Then I let out a breath as reality crept in. "Moving on such short notice is still going to be a headache. I mean, I'll have to find a job down there, and figure out where to keep the horses, and—"

He kissed me gently to silence me. "None of that has to be ironed out tonight. We have time." He ran his fingers through my hair and grinned. "The only question we need to worry about right now is what do we do with the rest of tonight?"

I smiled. "Well, in the immortal words of a cunning linguist I know," I said, pulling him closer. "Life's short, let's fuck."

## About Lauren

Lauren Gallagher is an erotica writer currently living in Okinawa, Japan, with her husband and two incredibly spoiled cats. When she's not snorkeling in the crystal clear waters around the island, trying to elude the Polynesian Mafia, or taking pictures of hermit crabs, she also writes gay male erotic romance under the pseudonym L. A. Witt. She is a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, Ulysses S. Grant, and the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. This makes for the occasionally awkward family reunion.

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